

Winter in LÃ-f's Holt

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Summary: Hiccup is back on Berk after having been missing for five years, just on time to hunker down for the Winter. But will the seemingly endless season hold beauty and happiness for him, or will everything that happened so quickly finally catch up with him? Rated for violence, colourful Viking language and some adult situations.

1. Prologue 1 - LÃ-f

Welcome back to the Berkian Eddur â€“ the second Edda begins here. I would like to make a few things clear:

There are a number of things that this Edda will tackle. The central theme, however, is the story of Hiccup and Astrid. It was the major plot-thread left unattended in Becoming, and the most important unresolved issue in Hiccup's life.

This story will therefore contain scenes of fights, friendships, differences of opinion and love â€“ both emotional and physical. The M rating does not mean that there will be scenes of physical love very often, but there is mention of it, and it is often on people's minds. As you can see by the very first scene, cultural norms of the time are being respected were communal baths were common â€“ I will actually highlight the fact that Hiccup, as son of the chief, actually has privileges in privacy that many others do not have.

But this is not only a love story. As returning readers will know, I don't quite write linear plots. So of course, Hiccup and Astrid circle each other's hearts while life still happens in Berk around them. The Thing is coming up â€“ and many, many other factors with it.

That said, I would like to stress that **this is a

continuation****. Any new readers coming across this should know that a previous story, ****Becoming ****L****Ã-fÃ%rasir comes first****. Unfortunately, ****to understand the basic premise of this story, it is best to read the previous one****.**

Without further ado; here is â€|

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><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

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><p>Long Winter's Start

LÃ-f

**What good is the warmth of Summer, without the cold of Winter to give it sweetness?**

â€• _**John Steinbeck**_

Astrid walked towards the well, her beloved nadder making sure to shield her from the rain with an extended wing. Ever since the battle that had killed the Red Death and brought Hiccup back to Berk, her nadder had been an inseparable and intrinsic part of her life. In the final moments, when she'd seen Hiccup being flung off Toothless' back, and had thrown herself off Stoick's dragon, her nadder's name had burst from her mouth.

In that moment, as she fell through the sky and watched the nadder hurtle towards her, she knew that this dragon would be her loyal battle sister for the rest of their life. It was true that the dragon had perhaps responded to her being in danger rather than instinctively knowing that Astrid had given her a name seemingly ordained by Freyr, but Astrid couldn't help thinking that Stormfly had always known her name, in the same way that Astrid had also always known it, and retained it, for fear of getting too attached to the illusion of peace between human and dragon.

Now Stormfly answered to her name in an instant, and Astrid knew she would die to protect this dragon, as Stormfly would die to protect her.

"Stormfly, darling," she called up, her dragon putting a head under her wing to look at Astrid. "Can you blow some fire down that well for me? Good girl!" She was obeyed right away, and Astrid then lowered the bucket into the now-melted water at the bottom of the well. It would freeze over again in a little while, but since the advent of dragons, it truly had become a joy to wash in the Winter, where before it was one of the horrible chores that no one looked forward to.

Even if the bath at the end was always worth it. Blushing slightly, she hugged the bucket to herself and hurried home, trying to get there before the water froze in the pail. Stormfly raced after her, a wing always cocked to cover her from the freezing rain as they mounted the hill up to the Haddock hall.

The warmth engulfed her as soon as she entered the closed dragon shed. Between her nadder, Stoick's nightmare and Toothless, all now beloved companions, they had not been able to accommodate them all indoors in the main hall, but were not about to leave them out in the Winter freeze, either. The same problem had occurred with almost everyone on Berk. So most of the village had found itself scrambling with last minute construction, fighting against time as the weather had become less and less favourable for any outdoor activity. The Haddock hall had been the one leading the way; the building designs that had begun going up around Stoick's home, with Gobber giving a hand, had by far been the most efficient, and others had quickly begun copying it.

It had of course come out of Hiccup's quill. While he had been unable to help in the actual construction, and hadn't been cleared to fly yet while the construction was going on, he had put his mind to the problem with an alacrity and an efficiency that spoke of long practice in problem solving and skills acquired through experience and hard work. Thanks to him, working closely with Fishlegs and the other woodworkers including herself, they had managed to finish the shelters before the second snowfall in the third week of Autumn.

Astrid put the pail down in the dragon barn for a moment, long enough to open the heavy wooden door for her dear dragon. Stormfly gave her a hand with her snout, and then walked in, gently shutting the wooden door behind her a bat from her armoured tail. With a chin-scratch in thanks, Astrid took the last bucket of water up, passed through the door that had been cut out of the hall's side, and entered the main room with the warm, merry fire-pit, shuddering as the higher temperature of the hall's main room made her notice how cold she was.

"Alright?" Hiccup smiled from his place, looking up from the wooden plank on his lap he was using as a writing desk. Toothless, the only dragon who could pass through the door between the barn and hall, was curled up at Hiccup's feet, snoring lightly as he basked in the fire's warmth. As a fire-breathing reptile, he didn't need the warmth, but everyone in the tribe knew that Toothless was spoiled, and everyone was more or less to blame, seeing that his status as a hero alongside his rider had made him everyone's favourite. It also didn't hurt that he was the first dragon that had begun playing with the children and keeping them safe, occupying his time as his rider recovered by letting a variety of ages totter up to him, climb on and then carefully be walked squealing around in circles, spreading his wings in mock flight to cause calls and giggles.

Astrid looked fondly at the dragon before closing the barn door behind her. She knew Stormfly would make herself comfortable, and Fireworm was already curled up in sleep. The days were getting shorter, and ten hours of sunlight was all they got at the moment, so the reptiles tended to sleep and rise early with it, or even before it. She smiled back at Hiccup, who tilted his head at her.

"I'm fine," she said with a warm chuckle, putting the bucket down and taking her damp fur coat to hang on a knob to dry. "Has Toothless been out with the children again?"

Hiccup's smile widened, his eyes twinkling in the firelight. "Out

with the first light, and come back covered in snow and wearing someone's yak-wool hat." He waved it around as proof, causing Astrid to snort. She came around the fire pit, moving to the tiny room beside Stoick's bed chamber. It had taken her quite a while to get used to having a separate bathing room, not when Astrid had grown up dragging the wooden tub out of its corner on washday and having everything happen within the same large room. But the chief's hall was the chief's hall, and the small perks of being the leading family on Berk were hers also, now that she had joined the clan.

Well, she said joined, but in realityâ€!

She shook her head, emptying the last bucket into the tub. Stoick had bathed this morning already, and Astrid had dutifully emptied the bath and filled it again, though it had taken her almost all the remaining short morning. Stoick always bathed first, as head of the household, and took his weapons with him. Astrid had then used the same water to wash Stoick's linens, putting some to the boil on the fire outside. But Hiccup deserved and needed clean water, so the tub had been emptied, scrubbed, and now refilled. The fire on one side of the tiny room made it toasty, and with a bite to her lip, Astrid quickly undressed, remaining only in her long white under-linen that reached her knee. Quietly, so as not to disturb Hiccup yet, she walked into the main room, gently shaking Toothless up, and he heated the water for her with two blasts. For all the work he saved her, he was content with only a few head-scratches and cuddles as payment .

And with a blush and an uncomfortable roll of her shoulders, she couldn't put it off any longer. As soon as Toothless had pushed his way out of the main hall to go nap in his stall of the dragon barn, Astrid poked her head out of the bathing room and stalled a moment more. Hiccup was concentrating on what he was drawing, quill sliding over the parchment in smooth, inked strokes as he paused only to dip into the inkwell or to scribble something on the sides. She leaned against the door jamb, ignoring the heat escaping into the slightly-less-warm main hall room, watching his skilled fingers and the muscles of his hand and arm bunch up and relax in the firelight, lip firmly in his teeth as he consulted another piece of parchment that looked like it had calculations on it.

A glowing warmth had lodged in her chest some months ago, and it rolled with new heat every time she looked at him and discovered something new that she had come to like about him. The way his hair flapped back when he flew without his helmet, how intensely he stared at things, how he waved his hands animatedly when he spoke, and how he laughed, really, really laughed, when something funny happened to tickle his humour, like the prank Tuffnut had played on Gobber last week that ended up with the blacksmith covered in yak-milk and evading the terrors trying to lick it off him.

And now, another thing that she could dwell on and smile at later; how concentrated he got as he worked on something, forgetting everything else around him as the paper he was writing on became the his whole reality. It was a silly, dangerous trait that could get him captured or worse, but there was little chance of that, not when Stoick, Toothless and Astrid herself always made sure to have one eye on him.

Stoick and Astrid especially. They weren't about to let him disappear

into thin air again.

Hiccup suddenly huffed, a frown bringing his sharp brows down as he threw his quill into the ink and groaned. "I'll have to ask Fishlegs," he said to himself in a resigned voice. Astrid moved closer, giving his work a look over his shoulder and realising he was trying to design a wooden winch large enough to lift a barn face. The warm place in her chest gave another roll; she'd heard Sven the younger huffing and puffing about how long it took to do that without the dragons, who couldn't always be coaxed to fly in a cautious enough manner. Obviously, Hiccup was trying to find a solution and make the village's life better and easier again.

"What is it?" she asked. Hiccup started slightly, but brightened when he looked at her.

"I don't know how much give this wood has, do you?"

"Pine or oak?" she asked, reaching in front of him and taking the paper.

"That's what I need to decide," he replied. It was a point of pride that Astrid was a woman and knew how to read; she had been lucky enough that Hiccup's mother had often let her play with him as a child, and he had always been generous with his knowledge. He had unknowingly taught her how to read and write, and she had been smart enough to pick it up from their play. The parchment now told her that the wood needed to have minimal give around the metal wires, as the friction would eat it away to dangerous results, but the wood that the mechanisms would be embedded in needed to be soft enough to handle.

"Go with the pine for this part," she said, pointing to his diagrams of the cogs' insertions, "and the oak for the metal wire. Oak's sturdier - but I'd still coat it in resin and wax if I were you - it will snap the wood eventually anyway."

"Thanks," he said with a warm smile. He looked up at her over his shoulder, his eyes twinkling brightly and cheeks flushed, and Astrid couldn't help smiling back and putting her hand on his shoulder. But as always on wash day, this caused him to look away and tense up, and her hand slipped off him. "I'll write that down; I'll forget which order it was you said it otherwise," he added with a chuckle, taking the paper from her hand and adding a few runes with lines pointing towards quickly squiggled drawings to keep her instructions with the rest of the design.

"We really shouldâ€|" she started, thinking of the water in the next room, hoping it hadn't cooled too much, and going through all the washing supplies in her mind to make sure nothing was out of place as the usual nervousness washed over her. Her nerves had mounted higher and higher every washday, and the reason why was rather obvious.

"Very well," Hiccup replied reluctantly, standing unaided and never looking at her as he walked towards the bathing room. The glowing coals of the warm emotion Astrid had been feeling were doused by his sudden distance. This had happened for every wash day since he had awoken, and it was only getting worse.

What was sad was that Astrid had been looking forward to these moments. Her mother had always told her that she had bonded with her father over the bath tub, during the first few months of their marriage as they had begun to know each other more, and trust had been born of habit as they grew used to each other in the wash tub, learning loved and hated traits that would be lived with later with a shrug, and speaking of all and sundry until the water cooled as they washed one another.

Hiccup on the other hand seemed firm in his desire to remain as distant from Astrid as possible on all things that were not the day-to-day of living in the same hall and living in the same village. The first time washday had come around his reaction to her unclothed body had been so severe that she had never dared to be completely unclothed since, always remaining in her shift as she shared the tub with him, because he hadn't looked her in the face for the following two weeks straight.

It was made worse by the fact that it wasn't only her duty, but her utter obligation to be here. He wasn't only her betrothed but also an injured member of her family. The Goethi had been very clear that the wound, not yet completely healed despite being burned shut and sutured carefully, could by no means be wet unless it was with the healing liquids and poultices she had provided. This led to Hiccup being completely unable to bathe on his own, even if he could somehow make it in and out of the tub with his metal leg missing and the slippery stone floor of that room.

Astrid swallowed her nervousness and moved towards the bathing room, closing the door behind her and kneeling to help him remove his leg as he struggled with it, leaning against the tub. She didn't dare look up at him and smile as she had the first few times she had done this - she'd only find his face turned to the side, stubbornly refusing to look at her for the duration of the bath.

Quickly and efficiently his leg was off, and she swaddled the metal in a rug to keep it from getting wet in the room's moisture. His trousers followed, and then she rose and helped him out of the green woolen tunic while making sure to keep him steady.

The tub had been built to suit Stoick's greater size, so that it felt almost like a small pool, even with the both of them sharing it. The step inside was a large one, problem Astrid had solved ages ago by putting a log in the instep. Together, they climbed - and hopped - to the edge of the tub, where Hiccup sat down and Astrid quickly climbed in, pushing the bathing stool behind him so he could just push back onto it. He did so quickly, swinging his good leg in after he'd sat down and sinking only partially into the tub as his bad leg rested on the ledge, dry and still swaddled in bandages.

Astrid had begun to speak out of nervousness, the silence of the room otherwise suffocating as the noise of sloshing liquid became too loud and jarring.

"Ruffnut will be over later," she said with a forced chuckle as she wet his back and hair using a wad of clean wool and lye soap.
"Apparently, Woodnut's decided that since she has a name now, she can soil all the undies she wants. I've been trying to tell Ruff to use more moss against that poor baby's bottoms, but more moss is for losers."

Hiccup chuckled, and it felt like a huge victory. "Let me guess, Fishlegs is backing away slowly and waiting for her to stop blowing things up before he says anything?"

"Actually, he begged me to lend a hand, which is why Ruffnut and her smelly bundle of love are going to join mum and I later, after I'm done!" No! Don't mention the current activity! "... cleaning the tub out. Honestly, I think your father let Fireworm in with him this morning." Oh Freya have mercy, she managed to dodge that.

"I think you may be right," Hiccup chuckled again as he washed his own front, and Astrid rolled the lye soap between her palms and began lathering his hair. It had grown considerably lighter and redder since he had returned, a common side-effect of the soap they used on Berk, but Astrid couldn't say she didn't enjoy the shining strands of soft hair passing through her fingers. She angled his head backwards, careful not to get any lather into his eyes, and a thrill went through her starting at the center of her chest and warming her skin outwards when he relaxed and leaned backwards. She massaged his skull with her finger pads and his eyes fell closed as he groaned.

It was only a moment, but Astrid immediately felt her heart skip and begin to beat faster as she watched him go slack under her hands. It was an unbelievable feeling, one she'd never had before even when they shared the bath, but it was a warmth beyond the bath water spreading all over her skin, like a blush traveling from her face to the tips of her toes.

Then he seemed to realise what he was doing and stiffened terribly, almost yanking his head out of her hands and pulling his own hair in the process.

"I got soap in your eyes, sorry!" Astrid said, to try to give him a valid cover and reduce the awkwardness. He stammered an accession and she quickly used the washing ladle to rinse the soap away from his face and hair. The warm feeling faded to an unsatisfying lull, like a cold cup of ale left too long on the Great Hall's counter.

His exit was quick after that, Astrid following with her sopping wet shift sticking to her skin uncomfortably. She helped him dress and put his leg on, then walked him across the slippery floor until he could find better purchase on the wooden floor of the main room.

He gave her a shy glance and a small smile over his shoulder, heading back towards the fire stiffly and showing no improvement whatsoever for all the soothing effects the hot water was supposed to have on sore and aching muscles. Astrid shut the door, turning back to the tub and entered the cooling water again, quickly washing her own hair before soaking a few of the more delicate linens in what was left of the soapy water.

She climbed out and undressed, peeling the shift off her skin and hanging it to drip and dry in front of the bathing room's fire. She wiped herself down and dressed quickly, braiding her still-wet hair with quick fingers and beginning once again the long process of emptying and cleaning the tub, gathering the wet linens and putting them up to join the shift. She opened the door and hustled into the main room, busying herself with food and gathering the clothing piles for the next half hour as she waiting for her mother to come

calling.

Hiccup groaned again from his place by the fire, the shorter winter days providing little light within the thick wooden wall of the halls. He bent his parchment towards the fire, his metal leg tapping impatiently.

"What is it?" she finally asked, wishing that he'd just look to her for help more than anything. He scowled and rolled one shoulder, lips curled inwards as he scrunched his nose in annoyance at whatever was on the paper.

"I'm trying to improve the pulley-system we have on the ship sails and constructions," he sighed, scratching at a drying patch of hair that was glinting in the firelight. "But I keep coming up against the same problem of weight - I have to try to find a way to make one pulley that's able to take the weight from a sack of grain to a full fishing net. But I can't be sure how much they'll hold until I test them, and that won't be happening any time soon with \mathbb{e} !" he huffed and waved a hand towards his leg as he tapped the metal, jostling it nervously.

"Well, we can try it once you're feeling up to it," she assured, but his scowl only deepened and \mathbb{e} ah, was that a pout? It wasn't doing good things to her insides.

"I wanted to get it done before the Thing. That way we use them while we make the temporary shelters and take them down, and maybe we'll be able to show them off on the ships." He snorted. "Thuggory will be mad as a hungry gronkle that we one-upped him on the fleet again. We already have the better oar system."

Astrid smiled, watching him speak of the fellow heir of the Meathead tribe with a rather mischievous spark in his eyes.

"Try looping the wire? It will take more weight." Hiccup looked down at the parchment for a moment, but the furious scribbling that quickly followed made her smile to see his great mind at work again. "It will be nice to see them all again," she commented as she salted some fish. "It has been almost three moons. Do you think they will all come?"

"Thuggory and Heather will, I'm sure of it," Hiccup said, "And Cami. I'm not sure about Dogsbreath - he doesn't enjoy the din of this sort of thing - but he's of that age now. I don't think his father will let him stay behind."

Astrid opened her mouth to reply, but her mother knocked, her head peeking into hall with a merry look about her.

"Ah good, you're still here!" Astrid waved her in, and Brunhilda dropped her cargo of dirty laundry, which was not as huge as it used to be in Astrid's younger years. All of her various sisters-in-law had obviously been given the wolf's share, and now her mother took the most precious or easy pieces off to join her own daughter's loads. "Has our walking disaster arrived yet?"

"Oh no, Ruffnut's late," Astrid answered with a laugh she shared with Hiccup. She went to gather her own basket of washing-up, and dragged a hand warmly across his back as she passed him. When he only smiled

back at her, Astrid's chest lightened again. "Hiccup, I'll be by the river. Sorry to ask you this, but you'll watch the pot for me? It's only next to the grate so it shouldn't burn, but unlid it if it bubbles. Is that alright?"

"Do I get extra stew if I burn myself?" he asked innocently. Astrid laughed along with her mother at his blatant bribe, and Astrid punched his shoulders lightly in a way that made him pout and grumble, and caused her cheeks to colour at the sight of his slightly protruding lip.

"We'll see!" she replied with a cheeky wave, which he answered with a childish poking of his tongue. She was still laughing as she climbed down the hill with her mother, both laden with clothing, to go kidnap Ruffnut from her own personal domestic hell and take her to their corner of the river.

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Fishlegs couldn't help the smile that came to his face at his daughter's high pitched squealing as she tried to reach for the toy Hiccup and Astrid had made for her. The blonde was holding it up, tilting it this way and that so that the water inside would slosh against the tiny metal sides, and the wooden handles were still slightly too big for her hands. Technically, the toy should have been too heavy for his little girl, but she was her mamma's daughter, and so of course, she had hit herself on the head with it the first time she'd tried to lift it, and began laughing.

Asgard help him when she was old enough to start reaching for things. They were going to have to tie her up to Meatlug.

To avoid further accident, Astrid was the one holding the toy this time, carefully flipping it so that the liquid inside made the noisiest sloshes it could, and the peals of laughter from the cot bounced around the room, causing everyone there to smile.

Or cackle. His wife and her brother only cackled.

"Thanks again for that," Ruffnut said, working on some mending and looking like she was trying to cover his entire tunic in stitches. Ruffnut had learned a great deal of things since they'd married; sewing, it looked like, was not going to be one of them. "It keeps her entertained for hooours." Ruffnut's blissful sigh made Fishlegs wonder slightly at how much hidden work was involved with caring for Woodnut. He knew his wife and their friend had just come from their washday duties, and that Woodnut had been coddled and loved all day by the Hofferson women and his wife, but his Ruff sounded exhausted, and that last stitch was so crooked it was almost straight, which was a terribly bad sign. He was also aware that he was lucky, as by the time he returned home at the end of the day, his little shield maiden was almost tuckered out, so he got quiet requests for cuddles and drowsy waving hands. But on Washday, he was here all day and could see that even after a morning of activity and attention, Woodnut didn't look like she was about to take a nap any time soon.

Hmm. Perhaps this week, his mother would watch their little one - he knew she had been itching to. If Ruffnut permitted it (as his mother tended to try to teach her manners), his wife could get a nice day of sleeping.

And maybe visiting him at the building site because she had cramps. That would be nice too.

He came back from daydreams about soft bushes and long blonde hair when he heard a squeak, and Ruffnut laughing uproariously. He blinked, and found a red-faced Astrid huffing like a bull and pointedly looking into the cradle, still waving the toy at the entertained child, Ruffnut beating her knees as tears of mirth threatened to spill, and Tuffnutâ€œ hanging against their wall, as nailed by a dagger through the collar.

"Eouph, let me down, you stupid woman!" he whined. Ruffnut wiped her eyes, giving him a vicious look before she stood and took the dagger out without warning, throwing her brother on the floor.

"Suits you, idiot," she drawled at him.

"What? I only said she was good with the kids, and that the practice would come in handy when she and my man Hiccup start getting—" Another dagger passed by his face, slicing off hair that floated to the ground sedately. Eyes wide, he shut up as Astrid kept looking down at the cradle with a thunderous expression on her face.

He exchanged a knowing glance with his wife, who nodded at him sadly before sneaking a peek towards their friend. Fishlegs had noticed that although the relationship between the betrothed had begun to grow slightly closer, there seemed to be an ever present barrier, one that neither one of them seemed able to bring down. Fishlegs had tried speaking to Hiccup, subtly, but had managed to glean nothing that could help either of them. The Hiccup he had known in his youth had been an open book, unable to hide sadness and delight and with his heart on his sleeve and offered on his hand at the drop of a hat. Evidently, that boy had grown up into a taciturn, self-sufficient man who cared just as much, but now had more difficulty expressing it.

Poor Astrid. She was going to have two Stoicks on her hands.

Still, that didn't mean that Astrid was going to be uncomfortable under his roof. Fishlegs had been lucky enough to be able to start a new hall with Ruffnut, since his family was wealthy, he was into the business of building halls anyway, and his father's was so over-crowded that there had been no hope of fitting in his new bride and family. His mother lived next-door, of course, but Astrid had often come here to find solace and some refuge from the often-quiet walls of the Haddock hall in past years. Tuffnut's long, stupid tongue was not going to take that away from their poor friend.

In fact, Tuffnut should just learn to shut up. He had a good way to make him do that, right now.

"Why are you polishing those shields anyway?" he grumbled in mock annoyance. His wife, bless her, looked at him with bright eyes - poor Ruff had been thought stupid by association, and not even Tuffnut himself was as daft as people assumed. It took smarts to come up with and plan all those lovely traps and pranks, and pretending to be dull had it's advantages. Ruffnut, of course, had realised what her husband was going to do, because it was awful and deviant, and Tuffnut deserved it. Of course, it would seem, Fishlegs was not the

only one influencing the spouse in the relationship. "And why are you doing it in my house?"

"Eh, they needed polishing," Tuffnut replied noncommittally, ducking his head to hide his face behind the round sheet of wood and metal. The women could see nothing, but Fishlegs was sitting with his pipe at just the right angle to see his brother-in-law's face go up in flames.

Yes, this was going to be fun.

"Are you feeling hot, Tuff?" he asked innocently. "Ruff, I think the fire's getting to his head."

"Oh, I know what's getting to his head, and it's not the fire," Ruffnut replied, taking her cue as he gave her the opening. "He's polishing those because he wants to look good." She snickered in that fashion that was unique to her, and Fishlegs found himself biting his pipe stem to stop from smiling.

"Really?" he asked just as innocently, pointedly ignoring Tuffnut's yelped protests and threats as they spoke pretending he wasn't even there.

"Don't you know? The Thing is in a few weeks," Ruff went on, her sly grin growing wider. Fishlegs began to wonder if Astrid would take little Woodnut for the night if Ruff kept looking at her husband like that; Freya knew that Hiccup had taken his duties towards their little girl in utter seriousness, and he adored Fishlegs' daughter. "And we all know how Tuffnut the chicken destroyer has a thing for a certain Bog girl."

"I told you to leave out the middle part!" Tuffnut yelped, throwing down the shield and launching himself at his sister. Fishlegs and Astrid merely raised their legs whenever the two rolled towards them in their wrestling match. As almost always happened since Fishlegs had strung Snotlout out to dry, Tuffnut ended up tapping out with his sister twisting his arms mercilessly.

"Tuffnut the destroyer doesn't suit you," Astrid pitched in, getting her small revenge with a grin. "I think Tuffnut the chicken destroyer is more suitable."

"That's not fair!" he replied from the floor, where he stayed after Ruffnut got off him and moved to sit beside Fishlegs. "Fishlegs got an awesome adult name - I mean, not that 'the wise' inspires fear in the hearts of men or anything." Ruffnut's shoe pinged off his helmet. Fishlegs had earned that title for being the one to notice who Cat tongue had really been, and keeping quiet about it until his friend had been ready to speak. "Astrid's been all 'loyal' for years." A rattle flew at him this time, and he was lucky enough to dodge this one. "Hiccup's â€œ yeah, not going there." Astrid had armed herself with Woodnut's dirty diaper, a threat more terrifying than any dagger in the hands of a well trained throwing arm.

"Snotlout and I are feeling left out!"

"You don't have to feel left out," Ruffnut said, settling into Fishleg's side with a leer. "Just accept your adult name with pride and honour, Chicken Destroyer."

"Argh, how am I going to impress C- girls! Girls! How am I going to impress girls with a name like that! And it was one prank! Out of a gazzillion! They had to go and choose that one!"

"Your fault for making exploding chickens so memorable," Astrid snickered. Tuffnut wailed in agony, which only made them laugh harder.

"Don't say it when the Thing's happening, please," he said glumly, and Fishlegs exchanged a raised brow with both women. Since when did Tuffnut know of the existence of that word?

"Oh alright," Astrid said with a snicker.

"Eh, speak for yourself," Ruffnut replied with a wave of a hand. "I say no woman's worth my brother if she doesn't think exploding chickens are awesome."

Tuffnut gave a discontented groan, which they all laughed at again, Woodnut trying to raise her head to see what was so funny, even though she was already laughing at the mere sound of their mirth. Astrid took the child up in her arms expertly, having grown used to handling the baby by now, as well as some of her brothers' children.

"Oh cheer up," she told him with a chuckle. "From what I saw, that girl might actually help you feed the chickens herself next time."

"You think so?" he asked, too hopeful to be casual. Astrid have a chuckle that made Fishlegs frown: was he paranoid or was that a slight wry edge to it?

"Sure."

Tuffnut's next idiotic grin was rather too funny not to laugh at. Fishlegs chuckled along with the women as Astrid gave Woodnut to Ruffnut as the girl began fussing for a breast.

"Well, I'm off. Thank you for the hospitality, as always," she said, rising and heading for the door.

"Any time you want to come take this little monster off my hands..." Ruffnut said leadingly, even while she cuddled the child to herself and opened her tunic under her shawl.

"Not to that point quite yet!" Astrid replied cheekily as she nodded towards Ruffnut's front and opened the front door.

"Yeah, you've got to get Hiccup to do that first," Tuffnut replied as he stood up. He was once again nailed to the wall with a dagger through his fur vest, and this time nobody bothered to take him down as the door closed behind Astrid. The look he exchanged with his wife next only confirmed a certain number of his observations. He was at least sixty-three percent positive that he was going to need to speak to someone soon, but he had not decided who, as yet.

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The first prologue;

To start, the clues and hints and reading between the lines: Yes, it is back. The title once again reflects the 'End of the World' myth from Norse Mythos, and as an additional 'game' of sorts, the second primary couple in this story, and foil to Hiccup and Astrid, will be Tuffnut and Cami, and there will be a 'whodunnit' little three-Mary game in it for anyone interested to play. The small epithets for each chapter are also art of the 'clue' game, but be careful â€“ they may mean the exact opposite of what they state.

There ARE going to be errors; I apologise. I don't have time to re-read this mammoth, and I also want you all to get it as soon as possible. So some things are going to get overlooked.

Concrit is welcome. Flamers will be summarily blocked. I do not have patience for mouthing-off and passive aggression. You can peddle your wares elsewhere.

This story is going to come up all together. Because of that, I will not be able to answer all the reviews between chapters. I am also approaching my thesis deadline, so the time will be scarce for answers at all.

2. Prologue 2 - LÃ-fÃ¶rasir

**Stoick and Hiccup, Astrid and Hiccup and Snotlout.
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* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Long Winter's Start

LÃ-fÃ¶rasir

**Winter is the time for comfort, for good food and warmth, for the touch of a friendly hand and for a talk beside the fire: it is the time for home.**

â€• _**Edith Sitwell**_

The day had been a long and tiring. Or rather, the things to do had taken long, and tired him out; the day had ended three hours ago. The Winter sun only shone on them for eight hours, now, and he knew that his family had retired some time ago.

His family. It felt so, so beautiful to be able to think that. The words tasted fantastic even unuttered in his mind.

Stoick waved a goodbye and goodnight to some of the other men moving in the direction of their own homes, Stoick's journey being the shortest from the Great Hall after trudging down the long staircase. Another similar day would await them tomorrow, only the morrow would include the even more unpalatable topics.

The Thing was rapidly approaching, and the list of things to do seemed only to lengthen rather than decrease. Construction had already begun on the temporary shelters that would be given to the visiting chiefs, their families and their tribesmen. The Meatheads were coming three ships strong, the Bogs two, and the UglyThugs were facing the journey by dragon in twelve members.

The Beserkers had not yet replied. Stoick bit his upper lip, munching on his mustache as he mounted up the hill to his home, and lamenting the fact that he had to go down the stairs and then up the hill. Hmm, perhaps Hiccup could think of something â€!

Warmth effused his chest even before he stepped into his fire-lit hall, that thought chasing all the others away. His hall, now very much more lived in, spread around him with all the comforts of home. A pot was unlidded, keeping warm by the grate and effusing its tempting smell throughout the entire main room. Linens were hanging in front of the other fire - now almost dead - in the washing room, and herbs hooked to dry decorated the cooking area, where a few more fish had taken up residence hanging by their tail. Astrid had evidently been hard at work, and he knew that there were probably more linens and wools hanging to dry in different parts of the house and sheltered outdoors. The warm glow of both fires, the one in the main grate high and healthy, illuminated all the hall and gave a cheery, orange sheen to everything.

She didn't seem to be there, however. It wasn't unusual for chores to take her out of the hall, especially on washday, but this late after sunset was not usual of her. Stoick took his helmet off, hanging it on the hook by the door and sighing thankfully as the weight of it left his head. The cloak was next - the poor thing was in a more lamentable state than usual, seeing as it had missed its chance to be washed this week and the last. But with the Thing at the door, washday had stopped being a resting day for most of Berk.

Stoick collapsed into his stool with a sigh, undoing his braid and scratching his scalp. Some of his hair was still damp, as he'd braided the wet mop right after his bath this morning, so he let it flop onto his back after he shook it out, resting his back against a wall and holding his feet out towards the fire after shucking his boots. Ah .. so much better.

With a stretch, Stoick reached into a side cabinet, taking out his woodwork implements. He usually took some moments in the morning to do his little tinkering, but again that had taken a backseat to other priorities. With a quiet house and a warm fire, though, there was nothing stopping him from indulging in his acquired hobby. He began whittling at a tiny hunk of discarded wood, probably left-over from one of Astrid's more task-oriented works. A ducky began to take shape; his favourite form to carve, and the first one he'd done - he had taken up the hobby in order to fix Gobber's idea of a toy, after all.

Hm, where was Astrid? It wasn't like her to be so tardy. Then again, he wasn't the only one to have a lot to do - apart from her village duties, household and domestic chores, Astrid helped out a great deal with the carpentry. She had taken it up from him, in part, and from Fishlegs, as after he'd married Ruffnut. Astrid had often gone to the twin's new house and helped her ease into her new role.

And probably kept her from blowing her new hall up on a daily bases, too. Possibly the girl was right there at the Ingermann boy's new hall, discussing work to be done on the guest lodges. Stoick sighed; she never stopped, even for a moment.

The smell of the food in the pot became overpowering as he finally let go of all the thoughts of the day and relaxed, his back coming out of its many knots. With a quick glance around the hall, he reached for the pot lid, looking in to find a beautiful cut of venison in gravy and winter carrots that made his mouth water. Astrid had come a long way in her cooking; she'd truly been a disaster at first (he did NOT want to remember what she thought was edible, and what she'd originally added to food as 'condiment'), but Brunhilda had been her usual self, soft-hearted but hard-handed task-master, and the girl had taken to the challenge as she took to any challenge; with the knife in her teeth.

And that meat looked so, so tenderâ€!

"I wouldn't if I were you."

Stoick actually yelped, and was very glad that Gobber wasn't there to hear it - he'd never hear the end of it. Hiccup was leaning against the door jamb leading into the dragon barn, smirking at him knowingly. Stoick gave him a sheepish chuckle as he scratched the back of his head, making his drying hair stand on end. Hiccup snorted, pushing off the door frame and closing it behind him, then walked, wonderfully even, around to the kegs with a mug in hand he swiped off the shelf on the way.

"One or two blocks?" he asked, and Stoick felt suddenly displaced, and awash in a jumble of emotions. Ever since his son had become mobile again, and had been cleared to fly, Hiccup had been out and about as much as possible, the colder weather seeming not to affect him at all as he made loop-de-loops in the sky, or helped carry the sand sacks to bolster the river banks, or stood for hours on end in the old arena, training - at a more sedate pace, and much more gently - the dragon-Viking pairs that had formed to withstand the Red Death. Moments of quiet domesticity were rare, but when they came with echoes from years passed, they never failed to floor him.

"Wow, you're staring at the wall looking dazed and confused," his son's entertained voice cut into his thoughts, "two blocks it is!"

Stoick gave a snort, but his eyes couldn't help but descend to take a good look at the newer part of his son, shining brightly as it caught the firelight. His stomach felt leaden, and as Hiccup put the mug down in front of him and took the blocks of ice from meat's storage box, the chief had to force a smile, looking away quickly as shame welled in his chest, deep and burning.

That was his fault. He'd done that to his boy. His stubbornness and his obsession with the dragons had first driven his child to choose between his new companion and his tribe, and his neglect and impatience had pushed him off the island. Then Stoick had, single-handedly, almost slaughtered the entire tribe. And Hiccup had had to come in and clean up his mess. Now the result was staring at him in the face, clashing with the simple suede trousers his son favoured, which Astrid steadily provided. His new boot had been hand

sewn, and Astrid had even burnt a pattern into the hide, but when Hiccup was the one who took care of his clothing, it tended towards the simple and functional.

It made Stoick wonder, and another gaping hole yawned in his chest. Hiccup rarely spoke of his time away, save when it was to point out things he had learned when he was a guest in the other tribes which would help Berk make smoother negotiations. He never said where he got his strange, split-front tunics, or how he had managed, in very little time, to accumulate a rather considerable amount of wealth, which he'd brought from his island on the first day he'd been allowed to take his dragon to the air. Stoick would never forget the face Brunhilda made when he'd presented her a bolt of cloth he'd called brocaded silk, and told her to do with it what she will as he had no real use for it. The smart woman had immediately fashioned her daughter a rather fetching undergarment, which the girl would probably wear on her wedding night.

He had been generous with his wealth, too. Stoick had, in the end, accepted the large portion Hiccup had given him to join the Haddock household's coffers, but he'd still stored most of it away, so that his son would inherit it once he became the head of the household. And yet, every time the subject was broached, he â€¦

Stoick's eyes went down to his foot again. Speaking with the other heirs, he had learned that Hiccup had been nothing but kind, honourable and hard-working while he had been their guest, which had often happened during the Winters, so it never really made any sense to him to think that his gains had been ill-begotten. Still, his son was a man of many secrets now, and they didn't stop at him having managed to ground, tame, and then fly the most feared dragon of the archipelago.

A hand landed on his shoulder, making him start and look up at Hiccup again. He had finally gotten used to his son's face, no longer round-cheeked and soft-looking, but strong and angular, facial hair feathering the bottom part of his cheeks. Hiccup handed him a different keg of ale, and Stoick took it with a thanks as his son sat down. The chief noticed for the first time that Hiccup had picked the keg he'd poured first off the table and was nursing it with a tiny smile, thinking. Another secret, and another milestone missed in his son's life.

"You should really stop, you know," Hiccup said at last, moving his eyes away from contemplating the fire to smile at his father.

"Feeling guilty, I mean. What's past is past between us. Let it go, ok?"

Stoick sighed, feeling rather sheepish. It was Val all over again, looking at him through knowing green eyes that sparkled kindly.

"I have, but I cannot help but wish that it hadn't â€¦ come to this," he said dejectedly, Hiccup gave him a strange look before his eyes widened in realisation, looking down at his own feet.

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There were a lot of things that Hiccup thought his father had been feeling guilty about, but this was not one of them. The metal shone merrily in the firelight, springs and bobs looking smart after the

polishing he'd given them this morning after his bath. And he wasn't going to let his dad feel badly about this; if he had grown used to it, Stoick could too. They were Vikings.

Hiccup looked up at his dad, smiling.

"Oh dad â€“ it wasn't your fault, any more than it was Toothless', or Snotlout's. It was an accident, they happen. I could have lost that foot falling off a cliff or down a well or whatever other stupid thing tends to happen to me." He rolled his eyes at himself, glad when his father chuckled. He'd honestly grown used to his leg after the initial shock. The pain of re-learning to walk hadn't been pleasant, and the fact that Astrid had watched that â€“ but then he'd sat down one night, trying to sketch a better spring-gear for the bloody thing, and his mind had sparked with the immense amount of possibilities the foot could hold.

Within a week, Toothless' flying rig sported so many gears that Astrid had started calling foul play as they won their races with wider and wider margins. The disadvantage had suddenly become his greatest advantage, with hidden tools, a natural metal weapon in and of itself, and even secret compartments in the wooden portion where he could store things he wished no one to know of.

And he couldn't have his dad thinking about it like that and eating away at himself for nothing at all.

So with a resolute twitch of his eyebrows, Hiccup folded his arms and swung his metal leg up into his dad's lap. Stoick almost yelped, which made Hiccup smirk tauntingly at him.

"Go on, dad, it's not going to bite you," he said gently. Stoick looked at him incredulously, as if he'd made a joke during the council meeting again. That had only happened once, by Thor, and his dad had been looking at him and shaking his head and chuckling in disbelief for hours after, just like now. "I mean it," Hiccup said more strongly, taking his father's hand and moving it towards the leg. "Gobber's got one. Mulch, too, and several others. It's an-"

"Occupational Hazzard," Stoick finished, and father and son smiled at each other. Stoick looked down at the foot in his lap, metal warmed through between the body heat and the fire, and he rested his hand over it. Hiccup just took up his keg again and took a sip of ale. "Since when do you drink, then?"

"It keeps you warm," he replied honestly, not the least annoyed when his dad began examining the mechanisms he had added to the never ending project that was foot-improvement. "And really, have you met Thuggory? He's taken competitive drinking to a whole new level. There's no way you can avoid the stuff if he's around."

"He seems fond of you," Stoick said with a nod, taking his own keg up and putting a warm hand on Hiccup's knee.

"He decided I was his little brother ages ago, when we were knee-high and getting into trouble at this Thing or other because we did what Cami came up with, remember that?" Hiccup laughed, feeling honestly happy to think of his friend; excitement bloomed in his chest as he thought he would see him again soon. They hadn't met since the battle

for Berk, and he was really looking forward to the Thing this time, if only to meet them all in better circumstances. "But I'm never going to get dragged into another drinking game with him. The last time, we went to great lengths to make ourselves utterly ridiculous, and I woke up the next morning in just my britches with war paint all over me, up in the mountains and Toothless sitting on a bear. I still don't know what happened that night."

"Almost got eaten by a bear, apparently," Stoick said with a guffaw.

"Hardly. The poor thing was whimpering horribly and Toothless was using it as a rug." Stoick laughed even harder as he imagined it. "Dragons tend to be at the top of the food-chain, and Toothlessâ€| usually tops that too," Hiccup said with a chuckle. "He once fought off a scouldron. A scauldron."

"What in Asgard for!" Stoick asked, putting his mug down.

"She was breathing too close to me, apparently."

Both men laughed, Hiccup glad to see his father's eyes lose their shadow. With a final gulp and a sigh, Stoick pushed his mug away.

"I think I'll turn in," he said tiredly. Hiccup took his foot off his father's lap, but quickly stood up with him, shaking his knee to get it to wake up. Stoick, predictably, faltered and reached to help him, which allowed Hiccup to grab his hand and push an empty bowl into it. "...What?"

Hiccup answered him by cutting and ladeling some meat and gravy into it, reaching around him to break off a piece of whey-bread to go with it.

"Don't sleep before finishing that off. She worked hard on it. Woke up earlier than Toothless to get it going," he said with mock annoyance, then groaned. "I hope she doesn't kill me for touching it, but she did put me in charge of the pot while she's out dealing with all our muck."

Stoick laughed, slapping his back as gently as he could (which meant that Hiccup's teeth rattled). "Hiccup, that girl will forgive you anything!"

Hiccup winced before he could stop himself, looking away. There were a couple of things he was sure weren't that forgivable.

"Son, what is it?" Stoick asked, looking at him earnestly. "Is everything ok, with Astrid?"

Hiccup looked up at him, giving his face a thorough search as he wondered whether Stoick was the right person to speak to about this. But â€| he really needed advice. And Stoick was his dad. Swallowing down his nervousness, he nodded.

"It's just â€|" he sighed and looked at the fire, somehow easier than looking at his dad when talking about this. "You knowâ€| I mean, it's pretty obvious, how I feel about her, isn't it?"

"Well, how you used to feel was rather obvious, yes," Stoick said.

"Not once did she pass you by that your head didn't turn and your feet stumble on themselves. Once you managed to fall over while standing up. I never knew how you did that." A chuckle. "You still feel the same?"

"Oh, pretty much, yeah." Try ten times stronger, with much, much more ~~racier~~ additions to the 'to do with Astrid' list. "I'm just ~~racier~~ dad." He looked up at his father as he suddenly couldn't keep it in anymore. "Dad, I don't want her to be trapped."

"What do you mean, son?" Stoick asked, standing straight, warm hand on Hiccup's back.

"This contract." He huffed agitatedly, running a hand through his hair.

"Son," Stoick said worriedly.

"I love her, dad," Hiccup said before he could stop himself. The main room went silent, the fire merrily crackling away. He steeled himself and looked his father in the eye, swallowing uncomfortably. "I want her to be happy. And I ~~racier~~ don't want to have her trapped in this ~~racier~~ thing. Cooking, cleaning ~~racier~~ Astrid's place is ~~racier~~ swinging her axe and training others. And on her dragon."

"Hiccup, people change. The things they want change too," Stoick said with a warm voice. "Astrid's not the same lass she was when you left."

"Oh, yes, because I'm sure she's been so happy these last few years, dad."

"But that was, because~~racier~~!"

"Dad, tell me that she's been happy to do all this." He waved a hand towards the main room. "Really happy. That she hasn't been going on walks, or just plain going out hunting, or disappearing off to other places." Hiccup still remembered how she couldn't say that she was happy, when she was talking to 'Cat tongue' after a hard day of training the new dragon and rider pairs. 'Not badly-off' sounded remarkably like settling for the best she could get to Hiccup, rather than her having something she wanted. Stoick grimaced, rubbing his face.

"Just ~~racier~~ talk to me before you decide anything, lad. The contract's a contract, and we can't be seen to bend such things. You know that better than anyone, with your travels."

Hiccup nodded, shoulders sagging. "Look dad, I'm not ~~racier~~ I'm not going to do something stupid, I know that would do her more harm than good. But ~~racier~~ I want to know what she wants. She hasn't said a word, and that's not like her. She's always been one to speak her mind, see something she wants, or thinks is good, and off she goes after it. But this? Left it all up to me as if her life is not all that important. Of all things!" He chewed on his lip in frustration. When she'd said that she would be happy to have Hiccup back that time, it had obviously been an attempt to make him talk to her, seeing as she had confronted him with his identity the following morning. "I know you're going to say I should just ask but ~~racier~~ oh, call me a coward, but if she's doing all this out of duty, I'd rather ~~racier~~ It's been a

long five years, dad." He swallowed before admitting, "and she's been on my mind for every moment of it."

"I understand, son," he replied with a knowing look, the same glance in his eyes as he'd had when he'd given Hiccup his helmet, a lifetime ago. At the time Hiccup had been too heartbroken to appreciate it. Now, his chest was equally jumbled and tangled into knots, but he knew to appreciate every single moment he had with his loved ones.

"No dad, I don't think you do. I used to make sacrifices to Lofn sometimes," he said with some shame, rubbing face. "I didn't think even she who intercedes for forbidden marriages could do anything, but I couldn't help â€œ!" Stoick's arm pressed more warmly, and Hiccup reached an arm up, almost managing to reach his dad's opposite shoulder.

"It's no shame to love a woman with such devotion," he said gently. "But take it from a man who's actually seen that look in a woman's eyes. I don't think that there's much to do with duty in this. Not in the way she looks at you, and not in the way she touches you either."

Gah! And there went his mind again. The image of her butt-ass naked from that first washday was burned into his mind, refusing to go away and appearing at the most inconvenient moments. Like now. Or like last time, when Astrid was churning the butter, and he'd found himself escaping before he could utterly embarrass himself.

"I â€œ I find that hard to believe. But â€œ ok," he said. Stoick gave him a smile and a nod, moving towards his room with his food.

Hiccup settled down to wait for Astrid.

He'd been debating with himself for a good twenty minutes whether he should go out looking for her when she walked in, laundry basket in hand.

"Oh, Thor, there you are," he said with a sigh. She gave him a strange look as she quickly shut the door behind her. Even though finding kindling wasn't as difficult as it used to be, it was still a waste to let all the nice toasty air out.

"Thought anyone could do anything to me while I carried this?" she said, shrugging the shoulder her axe-head rested against with a grin. Hiccup held his hands up.

"Oh no, not a chance of that," he said with a laugh, although, now that he realised, he still owed her axe repairs. In fact, considering their contract, Hiccup now had a valid reason to give the silver back to her mother. Good, he'd never been a betting man, and he felt uncomfortable taking silver for something he would have done anyway. "I was just worrying that I was going to starve to death."

Astrid's eyes flicked down to the pot, looking suddenly chagrined. "Oh no, you didn't eat? Has Stoick eaten? I'm so sorry, I was at Ruff's and with Woodnut and all, I lost track of time!"

"Hey, it's ok," he said with a smile, sorry to see her so upset. Odin's one eye, he seemed unable to say jokes anymore without them

going all crooked. "Dad ate, I took care of that."

"Oh, good. But why didn't you?" she gave him a worried look that made him shudder all over. Astrid, worrying about him. It was rather a selfish dream come true. Then again, smiling would be nicer. Especially on those nice, full lips and-

Concentrate.

"I was waiting for you," he replied with a shrug. Her brows came down in a frown.

"You didn't have to do that," she said, hanging her axe.

"I wanted to. Besides, eating in company is always better," she shook her head and walked up with a smile, kneeling by the pot. "Hey, leave it." Her head shot up in confusion before he took the ladle and made two bowl up, handing her one of them. "You're half soaked, go hang that up before it starts leaching warmth off you."

"Hm, thanks," she said, giving him a spoon for the gravy as she momentarily set hers down on the bench beside his chair. Hiccup couldn't help looking as she took her outer furs off, the tunic underneath snug around her, as even the thicker Winter clothes couldn't hide how beautiful she was. When she reached up and undid her hair, he forced himself to look away. He knew he technically had a right but ¢ she hadn't really given permission in an explicit way yet. And he'd abused of her without her knowing enough already.

She sat beside him with a sigh, legs stretching towards the fire as close as she dared. Her boots came off next, and she wiggled her toes.

"It's pouring again, I take it?" he asked, blowing on a spoonful and sipping. He wiped his knife on his tunic and cut a portion of the venison meat, and it was as tender as he thought it would be. He smiled at her fondly, suddenly ravenous, but he found a moment to complement the food.

"Thanks!" she replied brightly, and he smiled at how she preened. Axe-throwing or cooking, Astrid always had to be the best. "And it's utterly miserable out there. What's worse is that by tomorrow, it will be all ice or sleet."

"Oh, what fun. I sure hope the nails will hold up for traction," he lamented, hitting his foot against the stones base of the fire with sharp clicks.

"You'll do fine. And if you fall ¢" she took a purposeful bite, "...Toothless can pick you up. Asgard knows I'm too busy washing your socks."

"You have half the amount!" he replied in mock offense, and they both laughed while he took another bite. Humming in approval, he turned to find her looking at him almost greedily. "What, it's good," he said.

"It's hardly that incredible," Astrid chuckled, her face flushed with the firelight. "I still have a lot to learn from mum. No need to make fun of me."

"I'm not! Seriously, have you ever tasted anything I cooked? No, right? Well, it's pretty freaking terrible, and I've had to live on it for most of five years," he chuckled, indicating his bowl.
"Honestly, this right here â€“ it's like a little piece of Asgard."

And the fact that she'd made it for him. But he wasn't about to say that; said too much already. She looked at him in speculation for a few moments.

"Was it hard? Out there, I mean," she asked, and Hiccup could see the spark of something in her eyes. Perhaps it was wanderlust. His stomach descended into his feet at the thought of watching her leave on her dragon, but even more so at how harsh it really was out there.

"Yeah, yeah it is," he said, wanting to make absolutely sure that if she did go, she'd at least be more prepared than him. "The first Winter near did me in. Toothless found a few rabbits, because otherwise that would have been the end of the Haddock line." Something warm landed on his knee, and he looked down to find Astrid's hand, squeezing. "You learn your lessons quickly. I was better equipped by the next one."

"You travelled outside of the northern sea, though?" she asked shrewdly. He knew she'd seen some of the things he owned, and they were obviously nothing Viking.

"Hm, the Summer after that terrible Winter. Thought I'd perhaps find somewhere warmer, further South. Again, learned caution the hard way," he said as he fingered his scars. "But at least Freyr had hammered it into my head well by the second try, and I started getting my way about more carefully."

"Are they different, the Southern lands?"

He sat back, remembering. "Oh yeah, different is a good word for them. Green, long, rolling hills, more sunlight than you've ever seen. But hardly any forest, then. I prefer our woods; compared to them, it's a desert."

"A desert?" she repeated, unfamiliar with the word. She took a bite of her own food and munched with a frown.

"Oh, I've only heard of that, didn't venture that far South - I started heading East instead. It's where I traded for most of the goods I got."

"Even the jewellery?" she asked, surprised.

"Especially the jewellery," he replied. "Anyway, a desert is supposed to be this really hot, big empty place where the god of the Eastern Capital lived for a time, and it's nothing but sand and sand for miles on end. Didn't sound like an inviting place."

"No," she said, looking at him curiously.

"What?" he asked around a mouthful of food.

"So, no pillaging? No beautiful lady giving you tokens of love and mementos to remember her by and sigh about later?"

"Ha! Hardly!" he laughed, thinking of sad, practical Sepha, the terribly insistent Bog women, the forge at UglyThug Island and some of Thuggory's cousins who had been a horror to avoid. "But speaking of which, when am I going to get one of those?" he asked leadingly, pointing to a number of small carvings of Thor's hammer strewn on the table. The amulets had come in high demand all of a sudden, for some reason that escaped Hiccup completely, and Astrid had begun making a small income from them that Stoick insisted she keep. She huffed and punched his shoulder, ignoring his protest.

"Still a wuss," she commented with a snicker, to which he pouted, only to watch her laugh harder. "Wait your turn, those are on order! I can barely keep up as it is!"

"What will you take in trade for one, then?" he asked, jokingly. Her eyes flicked downwards to his chin and she opened her mouth, and then thought better of it and buried her face in her bowl.

"I'll do it for free, but you'll have to wait for all the paying ones to be done first," she said with a shake of the head. "Will you believe that Tuff wants one?"

"Tuff? Tuffnut? Oh, no way," he laughed. "Whatever for!"

"I think he's going to be courting soon," she replied, a strange smile on her face. "He'll want good luck if he fails, and protection if he succeeds."

"She has many brothers then?" He paused. "Oi, should I worry?" he said before he could stop himself. She laughed, slapping his arm again, and he was grateful that she didn't look upset at the hint of his emotions towards her.

"Don't be ridiculous. It's Cami!"

"Oh no, you've got to be kidding me!"

"Not at all! Oh, you should have seen him, polishing all his armour and begging us to call him 'the destroyer' when she comes!"

They cracked up, and Hiccup just couldn't get enough of seeing her laugh as she began speaking animatedly of all the deviously horrid plans to embarrass him Ruffnut had in mind. The evening wore on to a close on that high note, with Astrid still chuckling as she rose up the stairs to the room that had now become hers.

As he lay back, Hiccup could breathe a sigh of relief that Tuffnut Thorston, at least, was not competition. The Great Wild Beyond, or the Great Warrior Within, however, perhaps still was.

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Snotlout would admit, at least now, that he was a hard man to love. At least, hard enough to associate with without a punch to the face. But they were Vikings, and a punch to the face was practically equivalent to a 'Good Morning'.

Which is why he didn't mind so much when he got a pebble thrown at his face by his cousin.

"Concentrate, Snotlout! We don't have all day!" Hiccup said with a laugh, ignoring the larger man's shaken fist. They were lugging around wood for the temporary huts, keeping with the lighter forms and cutting them into manageable sizes to carry. Hiccup had put his lessons with the dragons on pause to help out, as the lizards' superior strength really began to make a difference in the amount of work they could pull off in a day.

It had been a long time since Snotlout found himself enjoying the company of others so much. He'd somehow turned his head stupid with ideas that were only buzzing between his ears, and he's almost lost all his friends for them. And when Hiccup had lost that footâ€!

His father may not have agreed, but Snotlout had been hit hard by the Meathead heir's words. Snotlout had turned away from the task assigned to him on the day of the battle out of spite, and because of this, the island had had to scramble to fill the void, and Hiccup had had to go out headlong into battle, facing the monstrous dragon, and losing a leg in the process.

He hadn't said anything to his father, as he had been sure that Spitelout would have tied him up rather than let him go through with it, but as soon as his cousin had been conscious long enough to hold a conversation, Snotlout had asked for a private talk with him, where he'd gone to knee and practically offered himself as a Thrall. There had never been any love lost between them, but the way that Thuggory had spoken to Snotlout, and to Spitelout because of him, had made him feel shamed and beyond useless. He'd looked at what was left of his only cousin from his father's side, son of Aunt Val and great hero of Berk, and felt that if he'd ever done anything with himself, it was to do all he could to make that right. He couldn't make the leg grow back - not if he prayed to Loki or any of the gods - but he could at least appease the thoughts that kept him up at night while his cousin almost died with the fever consuming him, while watching Astrid find a quiet corner to cry, and watching Stoick, and Gobber, and other tribe's faces every time the news worsened.

Hiccup hadn't been amused. He'd received a stern talking to, a clap around the ears, and the order to get off his knees, you oaf. Hiccup had made him understand that he was mad at Snotlout, on no unclear terms furious, but it was his treatment of Astrid that had been discussed, and nothing else. As far as he was concerned, the battle and its results had been in the hands of the gods, and he was glad for it; said that if he could trade a foot for his own life and the safety of the village every time, he would do it in an instant.

Snotlout had left that conversation with two firm convictions; the village would be damn lucky to have Hiccup for a chief one day, and Snotlout would follow him to the ends of the earth and into the mouths of sea-serpents if he commanded it. The second was that there were a number of things his cousin pardoned, readily and without a grudge, and some other things that he did not. Snotlout's treatment of Astrid was one of them, and the burly young man had realised in the subsequent weeks that whatever designs he'd had on the blonde had better be forgotten, and soon. Not only was Astrid protective, vicious and attentive as any wife or mother he'd ever seen wherever

Hiccup was concerned, but the way his cousin looked at the woman could be mistaken for nothing else. Astrid already belonged to him by right, and Hiccup would be a fool to let her go, not when he obviously cared for her.

So he'd taken to shadowing his cousin, going where he went and trying to be as useful as possible as a way to atone. Right now, both men had shed their furs and were handling the logs in only their tunics, the heat of activity negating the dry cold around them.

"We need this load back to the workshop near the Old Gate," Fishlegs said, pausing and ticking something off on a list he carried around with him. "Those are for the Boggies."

"Nobody tell Tuff," Hiccup snickered, and Fishlegs snorted. Snotlout looked at the two men in askance. "Oh, don't tell me you don't know," Hiccup said, his face suddenly gleeful. He exchanged a look with Fishlegs, who shrugged. "Tuff's got a thing for Cami,"

"The Bog she-demon?" Snotlout said incredulously, almost dropping his log.

"Don't let anyone outside Berk hear you say that," Fishlegs admonished, picking up a log of his own with one arm. Psh, showoff. "You'll cause a diplomatic incident."

"No you won't," Hiccup replied with a laugh, carrying the log easily enough despite his metal leg. Toothless was giving him worried glances, but Snotlout had learned that the dragon often just did that because his cousin was prone to fall over randomly. No surprise there. "I think Cami would take it as a complement. In fact, I think you should pass that on to Tuff. She'd be flattered."

"Oh boy, she's Tuff's type alright," Snotlout remarked, and the other two men burst out laughing. The feeling of camaraderie was incredible, and Snotlout hadn't realised how much he'd missed it.

"Can you seriously imagine what it would have been like had those three met when they were younger?" Hiccup mused. "Thug and I were forever getting into trouble because Cami came up with some scheme or other while the Thing was going on. I remember one time she decided to steal the underpants off every chief during the night, and then hang them like a flag on top of the masts. That meeting â€‘ phew, we avoided the war that time because Freyr wasn't in the mood, because I tell you, Brawlnife wanted to skin her and wear her as trousers. Bertha just laughed and told them to get them down like men."

"Oh yeah, isn't that how the pant-pole competition was born?" Fishlegs remembered, and Snotlout joined in the snickering this time. It was always entertaining to watch the full-grown men and women trying to run up a lard-slicked pole to catch the pants at the end of it.

"We won't be getting any of those activities on this one though," Hiccup said mournfully, stopping to let a couple of children pass as they chased one another across the path. "Hoy, Gustav! Watch the ice! Anyway, the Winter Things tend to have indoor activities. Arm-wrestling, sheep tossing, a good old-fashioned eating

competitionâ€|"

"With the food fight!" Snotlout put in happily. Man he loved the food fights in feasts and weddings.

"Oh yeah! That's going to be entertaining this year, now that all the dragons can be let out. The terrors are going to think they're in Asgard." They laughed uproariously, "And of course, there's the dancingâ€|" All three men looked at each other in horrified resignation.

"Darn, you can get out of it, though," Snotlout said with a pout. Hiccup raised a brow. "Plead the foot, man."

Hiccup's other brow rose incredulously. "Oh, sure, especially after I've been doing this all day." He shrugged a shoulder with the log on it. "That'd make sense."

"But nobody has to know," he said, seeing an opening to help. "Here," he took the log, "Now we walk the rest of the way, and just take Fishlegs' list, and we're good to go!"

"You just want to look awesome carrying two logs," Hiccup drawled even as he took Fishlegs' list and they kept walking towards the Old Gate.

"What are you talking about," Snotlout said with mock arrogance. "I'm _already_ awesome!"

"Yeah, _that_ 's why you're still single, mutton-head," Ruffnut said as she came up beside them. Woodnut was strapped to her back and she was carrying a basket of bread and a flask. Astrid walked up a moment later, carrying two smoked hams.

"Any of those for us?" Fishlegs asked hopefully. Ruffnut elbowed him lightly.

"These are the welcome meals we're putting in the halls you're building, you gronkle-brain," she told him. Then she added with a smirk. "You'll get yours when you get home."

"Yes!" Fishlegs said, puffing his chest out. "I knew I had an awesome wife!"

"And don't you know it," Ruffnut replied with a frown and a waved finger under his nose. Had she not had the little baby strapped to her, and without the two logs on Fishlegs' shoulders, she'd probably have tackled him to the ground for a good old tussle.

"Well, most of it," Astrid said with a laugh, coming around the married couple to them. "Your mother asked me to bring you this, Snotlout," slipping a food-smelling linen package into his vest pocket as both his hands were occupied. "And this one's for you," she went on, turning to Hiccup and folding another linen package against his chest. Man, Hiccup was a lucky bastard. To have Astrid Hofferson looking up at him like that â€| and of course, he was blushing and looking away like an idiot. Because of course he wouldn't just swoop down and kiss her.

"What are you giving him that for!" Snotlout broke in before Astrid's

smile could disappear, lifting the logs higher with a smirk. Really, Hiccup needed some woman-tips from the Snotman. "I'm doing all the work, he's just â€“ standing around ticking lists!"

"Don't you try that with me, Jorgenson," Astrid said, but at least she was smiling. Then she turned to Hiccup with a stern look. "I saw you pass the log to hot-air over there, so I know you were over-exerting yourself. Again." She actually brought her hands up and put them on Hiccup's waist, stepping forward and for all intents and purposes, hugging him in public.

And what did Hiccup do? Grimace and look totally guilty until Astrid just shook her head (admittedly, somewhat fondly, but still) and moved away, making Hiccup grab for his lunch that was no longer squished between them. Snotlout exchanged a look with Hiccup's dragon, and they both rolled their eyes.

Gods, the idiot needed a wing-man, bad.

Thank goodness Snotlout was available for the job!

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Second prologue! Chapter 1 is next. Setting up the chess pieces is always so much fun. The first stirrings of the central conflict can be tasted here, the undercurrents of which will be felt through the whole story.

And Snotlout is a self-appointed wingman. Nothing can go wrong with that. The Snot Man's on the job.

3. Part 1 - Changing Tides - Flung Together

The first chapter, and conflicts have only increased.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Part 1 - Changing Tides<p>

**Chapter 1 - Flung Together**

**The true equaliser is the mountain cold **

**And stacks of cold flung together **

**Maybe then we'd listen to what each other is saying**

â€• _**Steven Herrick**_

Hiccup was having the time of his life. Gobber whistled merrily, keeping his singing down only because Hiccup was there with Fishlegs' little tot, screaming her little lungs off with laughter as Hiccup tickled her feet. He didn't mind having his work interrupted so much;

not when he was given such a cute little girl to care for.

"I have your feet now, they're mine!" he said, pretending to eat them, causing even more high-pitched giggles. Toothless had his head lying beside the child on Hiccup's knee, looking at her rapturously, and every time a tiny hand waved in his vicinity, the reptile gave it a nudge or a lick.

It warmed the heart, Gobber said, really it did, even of a crusty old battle-brother like him, to see Hiccup drop everything the moment Ruffnut had stopped by; looking utterly frazzled, half her hair smoking and the other half covered in drool. She told him he was on 'godparent duty before I strangle her with my own hands'. The Thorston clan had a family meeting this afternoon, and even though Ruffnut had married into the Ingemann clan, the Thorstons had their own rules of their own.

The blonde three month old gave a yawn, tiny mouth opening to show pink gums, and then she snuggled into Hiccup's chest. Gobber nearly dropped a hammer on his good foot at the look Hiccup was giving her and then the teasing started, but Hiccup couldn't help it. Woodnut's small face snuggling into his tunic was doing all sorts of things to his chest, and her hands were so tiny. Toothless's pupils couldn't get any wider if he tried. Woodnut babbled and blew bubbles, then seized Hiccup's finger and tried to stick it in her mouth.

"Ah no you don't," he told her gently, trying to shake her grip off. "My hands are all covered in soot and wood shavings. Wouldn't want to get you sick; your dad will flay me alive and your mum will finish me off."

"Wouldn't know about that," Gobber finally interjected. "I mean, Ruffnut would probably get to you first."

"That's reassuring," Hiccup replied smartly, dipping his fingers into a cup of ale nearby - which should have been kept for medicating his leg - and only then surrendering his appendages to the child. "Let's hope Goethi's right when she says the ale cleans the ills, or it's my head."

"Eh, Astrid'll protect you," Gobber replied cheekily, earning himself a glare and an eyeroll which only made the blacksmith grin back. "Though thinking about it, she's rather fond of that girl herself; you might want to start running. Or start giving her one of her own." Gobber's eyebrows were doing that thing again.

Hiccup dearly wished he could reach over and rip them off, sometimes, especially when they invoked that image.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Hiccup replied, nonplussed. "I'm sure she's just raring to go, waiting to be a mum on tenterhooks."

"Why wouldn't she?" replied Gobber, resuming his tinkering with the chain links. Ever since Hiccup had shown him the special knife he used to slice the individual links, he hadn't stopped playing with it for a moment,

"Gobber, it's Astrid we're talking about. You know, fierce, no-yakshit Astrid who will open your gut and make you wear it as a crown?"

"Oh aye, that she is lad," Gobber said, and Hiccup was momentarily distracted with Woodnut kicked him in the chin. "Ah, mean left kick, that 'un! Just like her mum! But really, Astrid's a woman, just like any other. If Ruffnut can have kids, so can Astrid." He made a â€œ| surprisingly valid point. "In fact, I'll be much mistaken if I say that Astrid hasn't brought up that kid at least one quarter of the way. I think you're going to take up another quarter yourself, so when the times comes to give Astrid those babiesâ€œ| "

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Hiccup cut him off, standing up almost too fast and making the baby gurgle. "Who's to say â€œ| you know, that I'm going to be the one doing it."

"Are ye nuts, Hiccup?" Gobber asked him with incredulity seeping out of his mustache. "I mean, you know about the contract, right? Asgard, why does Stoick have to leave all of these things to me! I mean, I get that he was too busy to talk to you about girls, and why your everything stands on-end when you get up in the morn-"

"Gobber!" Hiccup yelled, making Woodnut whimper and having to shush the little girl. He looked up at his teacher with a rather impressive glare. "We're changing the subject."

"Lad-"

"Nope! "

"Boy-"

"Not happening!"

"Hic-"

"Argh, that's enough!" With a huff, he deposited the kicking baby into Gobber's meaty arms. The elder smith dropped everything with a wondrous racket in order to receive the bundle of wiggly blankets, and then looked helplessly up at Hiccup, who gave him a rather impressive smirk. "Now you watch her, and I can actually get on with the work I was planning to do today."

"But what about my-"

"Nope," Hiccup cut him off, in no mood to be trifled with anymore. "I have work to do. You were just fooling around with my cutter. " Gobber gave a yelp as Woodnut yanked on his mustache like a doorbell. "Looks like you've got the entertainment all sorted out, too."

Within minutes, the smithy was filled with clanging again, and Hiccup drowned out most other noises (except, he couldn't really unhear Gobber using baby talk while Toothless rattled his now-colourful tail around). He knew he had little time, because this morning's woodwork had taken longer than he had anticipated, and they had only been able to do without him and Toothless at the construction sight about an hour after lunch. The light was already waning, meaning that it was around three hours past noon, and the sunset would be upon them sharply. Shorter days meant a sooner evening meal, and that would just mean less time to get things done.

Still, he was an old hand at this, and even though this was only his fourth one, there just wasn't much difference when the process of smelting the metal and folding it was the same. The repair was quick and easy - he'd just slip the original iron rod into the new wooden handle he'd made the previous day. The new new handle was done days ago, but he'd been called away so often that it had just languished in his old work-room (because he didn't trust Gobber not to fiddle with it and show it to someone accidentally), and already decorated in as many scales and stones as he could find in his travel hoard.

Within two hours, the head was complete, polished and ready to be decorated. It was really dark outside by now, and Ruffnut hadn't come to collect Woodnut yet, meaning that the meeting had dragged on and on. At least he hoped so; he was almost mad at Ruff for interrupting him again, but Woodnut was too adorable to mind, with all her chubby, rosy-cheeked happiness as she cackled evilly while literally hanging off Gobber's mustache. Mama's girl, without a doubt.

Hiccup dipped the axe-head into pot of melted wax on the stove, twisting his tweezers to manage both of the blades. Carefully, he began to dig the design out with a paring needle once it was dry, inscribing the intricate knotted lines he'd once seen on wondering folk who called themselves druids, and then more carefully, and much more subtly, writing the runes of the messages he wished with enough care to conceal them. The DrÃ³ttkvÃ¶tt came out quickly enough, but he dallied on the last, extra verse, unsure whether to add the three, telling lines on to the other six, but ultimately bit his lip and did it anyway, making sure to hide those lines extra-carefully within the knotted design.

He regretted it as soon as he'd done it, and almost scraped all the wax off, but when he looked outside at the now-dark village, he realised that there was no way he could get away with it. Sure, her axe had been repaired, but the thing wasn't adequate for her anymore, not with her new height and wider hips (not that he was noticing!) dropping her center of gravity a few inches. The longer handle and wider blade would compensate, and â€œ and he'd wanted to give her an axe - give her anything, really - that he knew she would carry and that would keep her safe where he â€œ really couldn't do much, not unless he was astride Toothless. When he remembered the battles he'd actually faced ... he didn't want to be in that place again. Killing simply was not for him.

He huffed, feeling less than happy with himself at the thoughts. He was better than this, really; the five years he'd been away had taught him many things and he was better for it. Hell, he would openly admit that he would be a different man without them filling his coffers of experience. He should have come back with at least a mildly better outlook of himself, and he had, only, when it came to her â€œ

He sighed, ignoring his own thoughts as he simply let his hands do the task they knew by heart; clicking in the handle, pouring the acid very, very carefully next to the vent and then letting it settle through the wax and bubble at the metal, creating a metal smell that left the mouth tasting like blood.

"Oi, a little warning next time," Gobber said, and Hiccup turned

abruptly, remembering that Gobber, Toothless and - oh Frigga's mercy, little Woodnut was still there, now fussing as the rather distasteful smell filled the forge, despite the open window. The open side had been blocked up with board as it usually was in the colder months of Winter, and Hiccup quickly rushed to open two other windows, but it was too late. Big, fat tears began leaking out of her eyes, and Hiccup instantly flung the sealing powder on the axe to stop the acid before crossing the room in three strides. Gobber was holding the baby at arm's length, as if she was a bottle filled with zippelback gas about to explode.

"Aw, come on little one, shhh, shhh," Hiccup tried to soothe as he picked her up, and Toothless tottered up, but gave her one sniff and backed off with a disgruntled vocalisation. "Huh, I think she needs more than an air-chance."

"Aha, good luck with that," Gobber replied. Hiccup glared at him. "What, do you think I keep diapers just laying around the forge, just in case?"

Hiccup groaned in annoyance, casting about aimlessly as he tried to find anything that would take the place of a swaddling cloth at least until Ruffnut came back, and coming up with nothing but char and dirty rags he wasn't going to bring anywhere near the child. Woodnut began to cry harder, her newborn-thin cries long ago turned into the wail of an infant, which she was belting at full force. Upset at being unable to appease her, Hiccup could do nothing but rock her, as the usual bottom-petting he gave her was out of the question at the moment.

"Leave you on your own for five minutes," came an amused voice from the door, and he turned to see Astrid leaning on the door jamb, furs tucked tightly around her and a torch in hand. She fixed it on a bracket at the door, putting the basket she was carrying down on the window bench. Hiccup gave her the baby with some relief, though he stood over her as anxiously as Toothless inched closer. "What did the silly manfolk do to you, hm?"

"Hey," he protested, slightly offended. "She was fine until she needed a change. What was I supposed to put her in, Gobber's spare undies?"

"Oi!"

Astrid chuckled, cradling the child and kissing the crop of soft downy hair before looking around and giving Woodnut back to Hiccup. "Hold her for a moment," she muttered, taking the cover off her basket and spreading it on the bench. She put the child on her back, and she stopped fussing right away as she realised she was going to be relieved soon. Expertly, Astrid unpinned the dirty swaddle, folded and knotted it shut, before she dug a hand into the basket she had brought with her and looked at him apologetically.

"The napkin's warm from the bread, but the bread will go cold now," she said sheepishly, and Hiccup couldn't help laughing as he brought his basin of ale over, mixing a small measure of it into another clean bowl, which he filtered with water. With a nod of his head, Toothless blew a small, measured firebolt into the bowl, making it smoke. Astrid stuck her hand in it, frowning slightly before adding half a cup more water. Woodnut, meanwhile, began cackling at

Toothless, clearly having appreciated the fire shot.

"Three months, and she already loves things blowing up," Hiccup said with a smirk, leaning against the bench beside Astrid as she wiped the tiny girl's bottom clean with her handkerchief before wrapping the child in the napkin.

"Wouldn't you know," Astrid sighed, shaking her head at the now-happy girl, still cackling waving her tiny arms and legs. "We don't have any moss. Where's Ruff anyway?" Astrid went on good-naturedly. "She really needs to stop saddling you with her daughter."

"Everyone keeps saying it's just good practice," he replied gamely before biting his tongue. He cleared his voice and looked away.

"Anyway, Ruff had some family thing, and she left her with me for the last \approx four hours, I think." He valiantly tried to ignore his earlier comment, which wasn't too easy with Gobber snickering in the background and Astrid's badly flushed face.

"I'll go sharpen your project for ya," Gobber said with a grin on his face that nearly reached his ears. "Over there, where I can't hear things. A ways away."

Thank you, Gobber. Subtle, as always.

In order to do something with himself, Hiccup took Woodnut up again, and the child buried her face in his tunic and curled up against him, butt sticking out, rubbing her nose back and forth and warbling. Hiccup soothed her back and then began petting her bottom when she started making murmuring noises that sounded vaguely uncomfortable, causing Toothless to come up beside her and croon.

A moment of silence stretched between them as they both looked at each other and quickly looking away, Hiccup feeling like a fourteen-year-old again trying to string two words to tell her in the Great Hall, and Astrid folding her arms, leaning on the bench and looking around as noises of Gobber's blades against the whetting stone and his obnoxiously on-key whistling filled the room.

"So \approx four hours, huh," Astrid said at last. "That must have been one clan meeting. Why do they make her go to those anyway? She's not even part of that clan anymore, and the last time they forced her to go to one she blew up her old hall's back wall in retaliation. Maybe they're hoping she calmed down a little now that she's married and has Woodnut?" Astrid finally mused. Hiccup gave her a look that caused her to snort. "Right. Well, their loss; though she should have taken Woodnut with her. I'm sure she's up for a feed very soon, and we won't be able to quiet her down once that happens."

"She seems to be fussing already," Hiccup said worriedly as the baby began pressing her face into his chest insistently, stuffing as much of her fist into her mouth as she could manage.

"Hmm, I don't think it's that \approx " Astrid reached over, touching the baby's feet and exposed cheek. "I think she's cold," Astrid said worriedly. "Her blankets are all soiled, though."

"Get my old vest, it's hanging from that knob behind the door," Hiccup told her, petting Woodnut's bottom again and murmuring nonsense in the hopes of keeping her calm. Astrid darted across the

room, reaching around Gobber and snatching the worn vest, and Hiccup saw her stop for a moment to look at it, a strange expression on her face. He snorted. "That vest fits me now. I think dad was a bit hopeful when he had it made for me. I could literally sit on it for years."

The vest was dropped around the baby with a smile, and then Astrid took her back into her arms to tuck the swathes of fur around her better. Woodnut settled down to a sniffle, but wouldn't stop wiggling and batting her face with a tiny fist.

"Do you think you can continue doing the bottom-petting thing?" Astrid asked. "I can't really do it myself without her wiggling her way out of my hands."

"Sure," he replied, but the angle was awkward as his fingers bumped into Astrid's belly and furs. She gave him a considering look before nodding.

"Wait a minute, like thisâ€|" She turned and pressed her back into his chest. His heart gave a leap and started beating in his throat, clogging it all up. Astrid's ear and what he could see of her cheek were bright red, and when he took too long, she elbowed him gently. "You can probably do it more comfortably, like this."

"Rightâ€|" he said in a choked squeak, and he reached around, putting his hands on Woodnut's head and bottom, petting the baby comfortingly and quieting her down. Astrid, perhaps consciously, perhaps not, relaxed against him, and his heart gave a heave like a roaring Viking. Toothless came around them, putting his nose against the baby's feet, and the image burned itself into Hiccup's mind like it was scorched into his skin with living fire. For a second, it felt like he was holding his family in his arms; wife, child, battle-brother. He could feel Astrid's heart beating against the skin of his chest, and the temptation to tighten his hold into a hug and rest his cheek against her hair was almost overpowering.

A part of him wished he could close his eyes and just hold on. Another part of him felt a decided rush of panic at the thought of this - being locked down, boxed into a role he had given up on after he had left Sepha behind, and that now was suddenly thrust upon him with little choice and little alternative. Viking law was Viking law, and as his father had reminded him, contracts were to be respected at all costs.

And if he was feeling this way, with the wealth of emotion that he already had for Astrid, what must she feel? They barely ever spoke anymore before he'd left Berk five years ago, and when they had, the conversations had been stilted, one-sided and unwanted; at least on her end. A friendship had begun to re-form in the whirlwind days of the countdown towards the Red Death's attack, of that he was sure, but it had turned into something uncomfortable, with forced intimacy stretching the slowly-growing friendship beyond the comfort of it's own sedate pace into something often confusing and disquieting.

He sighed looking down at Woodnut, rubbing her bottom in circles as she gave a yawn with her tiny mouth. When Astrid had confronted him with his real name, she'd given him hope, but the sometimes awkward silence and the frequent moments of discomfort of the recent few weeks had put a dent in the elation he'd felt that day. Meanwhile

time and perspective had made him realise that there was more possible outcomes to this relationship than realising his lifelong dream of being married to the woman he had loved for his entire life. To her, the arrangement was political; most Viking marriages were. But it was both a selfish and an unselfish urge that drove him to make sure that she was not going along with it out of simple duty. He couldn't bear the thought of her being unhappy; he couldn't also bear the thought of loving her, having her beside him every day, while she felt nothing other than obligation and respect. A better man would probably have taken what he had been given and thanked the gods for the chance, but Hiccup had never been one to let a broken bone set on its own, or a leave a project once he had begun it. He would see Astrid happy however way she wanted, even if he had to break his own heart for it.

Hiccup blinked, watching as the warmth and comfort put the child to sleep, her soft breaths puffing against her long lashes. He looked to the side and found Astrid gazing up at him, a look in her eyes that drew him in as she gave a small smile. Her head was resting in the curve of his shoulder and she was peering rather openly up at him in a way that made him feel courageous.

"Say â€œ!" Astrid began tentatively, and Hiccup smiled almost unconsciously, his heart picking up in anticipation of some promise he wasn't sure was really there, but that he could somehow sense behind her eyes.

"Aw, ain't that cute," Ruffnut said, and both of them started. She was leaning against the door jamb, looking frightfully exhausted.

"Damnit, Ruffnut," Gobber said, hopping up. "It was just getting good!"

Hiccup felt a flush rise up his chest like a burn, and he quickly stepped away, turning to the bench to gather all the soiled baby things.

"Woodnut left us some souvenirs," he said with a smirk that was perhaps a little too forced.

"Joy," Ruff replied with a sour face. She took the near-sleeping baby from Astrid, who had roused herself somewhat at the sound of her mother's voice. Ruffnut tucked her into her chest sling and took the soiled clothing, holding them at arm's length with a grimace.

Rapid steps approached the smithy and Hiccup leaned out beside Ruffnut to see her brother walking up swiftly. He raised his arm in salute, but Tuffnut kept walking, a storm cloud on his brow, head ducked against his chest and looking like he was about to murder something.

"Leave him be," Ruffnut said, and there was a note of tiredness in her voice that was so completely genuine, and so completely adult that it made Hiccup look at her sharply. There was trouble here, he could smell it, and these two were old friends.

"What is it?" he asked. Ruffnut sighed, looking down at her baby.

"Would you believe," she said in a mocking tone she usually reserved to making fun of Snotlout, "that the Thorston Clan are all about honour? There is just so much crap going on that I wouldn't even know where to start even if I could say something, but they made me swear on my little girl's head that I wouldn't."

He felt his back straighten and eyes sharpen on her face as he took her in with one sweep. He could feel Toothless and Astrid come up behind him, but he looked at Ruffnut as menacingly as he dared instead.

"Ruff, do I need to know as son of the chief?" he asked cautiously, and Astrid stopped to inhale sharply. Ruffnut cackled.

"Oh no, nothing of that sort," she cackled, but it was a ghost of her usual devious laugh. "Wish it was, though. You're a deviant one. Learned that while you were hopscotching the islands, or does it come natural?"

"May have been an acquired taste from knowing Cami for so long. And you guys," he replied, his smile only partially honest as he watched her carefully to make sure she wasn't lying. "Knowing Viking laws to the letter has its advantages."

"I wouldn't mention her in front of Tuff if I were you," Ruffnut said, almost sadly. "It'd be cruel."

"What?" Hiccup asked, taken aback.

"I got lucky," she went on in the same wry voice he'd never heard before from her. "I didn't mind Fishlegs too much, and he turned out to be a decent man. And I really didn't care for anyone else. Tuffnut's going to get a shorter stick. The honour of the Thorstonsâ€¦ indeed." She sighed, waving a listless goodbye before heading off towards her hall. Astrid came up beside him, and slipped her hand into his.

He glanced at her looking out sadly after Ruffnut and a coldness passed over his chest.

"Poor Tuffnut," she said, sounding just as sad as she looked. "Just a few days ago we were making fun of him because he was polishing his armour before Cami came, and nowâ€¦"

Bile rose to his throat and he swallowed it quickly. Why was she holding his hand while telling him this? Looking so sad that it was unbearable? Was she â€¦ was she in the same situation?

She looked up at him, and as soon as she found him watching her she froze, as if realising what she was saying and who she was saying it to. It was hard to swallow as she looked at him with wide eyes, like she was waiting for him to say something terrible. What was she expecting him to do, yell at her? Remind her of the contract and tell her to stay in her place, that it was Viking law? He'd rather die.

"Yeah," he said instead, his voice breaking, so he looked away. His hand felt clammy, but Astrid hadn't made a move to take hers away, and he honestly couldn't understand it. If she felt that much empathy for Tuff, didn't that sort of indicate she knew what it was like? And

the only marriage arrangement she'd ever had was the one with him, soâ€|

"Well Hiccup, it's all sharpened and polished!"

"_Thor_!"

Hiccup and Astrid jumped apart, Hiccup even yelping like a girl as he turned quickly to find the elder blacksmith looking at him nonplussed.

"No need to get yer skivvies in a bunch. I'm not a drugr from helheim yet, and I ain't that ugly either." He dumped both axes into Hiccup's arms, the blade shining wickedly with it's brand new deadly edge. "Really now, the way you react, it's like you don't expect a man to be in his own smithy. I'll be off then, I know when I'm not wanted!" With a last glare he sauntered off with his uneven gait, grumbling about how he was so unappreciated, and they were forgetting him while he was _alive_, let alone when he was gone and out of their hair.

Hiccup blinked after him for a moment, arms full of weapons, before turning to Astrid. They both burst out laughing, and he was at least glad for the nervous chuckling. However, as soon as it died down, he instantly found the silence intolerable as Astrid's eyes began flitting to his and away again. Of course, he had the solution of a conversation topic right in his arms; the only problem was that he didn't really â€| after the whole speech about Tuffnut and short sticksâ€|

"My axe!" Astrid said happily, spotting her repaired weapon among the two in his arms. Unfortunately, his brain caught on to that fact later than his mouth.

"Oh, yeah, here, they're both â€|" Astrid paused in the act of reaching for her older axe, looking at him in askance as she glanced at the newer one almost shyly.

Gods, trust Astrid to get shy and flirty with an axe.

"Both â€| you mean, mine?" she asked, still with that shy look on her face. Thor have mercy, she needed to stop that and â€| ooh no, there went her fingers, up and down the handle with feather-light touches. He was getting goosebumps. He gave a resolute nod and her eyes _shone_.

Note to self: make her weapons more often.

"Hiccup, wow, I â€|" she took her old axe off him, and then gave him a look. "You repaired this one too? But dad only paid enough to cover one axe repair, and barely at that!"

"Technically, I don't need to be paid to make anything for my—" Argh! What was he doing! "I mean, yeah, um â€| your old axe is too small for you, and I thought I might as wellâ€| I learned a few things while travelling, worked in a few foreign forges, left a fewâ€|"

"Hiccup â€|" She holstered her old axe, taking the new one up with rapturous eyes and holding it up to the firelight. "Hiccup, this is

_amazing_â€| "

"Er, no, it's not anything special - I mean, no, wait -"

Astrid backed up a few steps, throwing the axe from one hand to the other, rotating her shoulder with a couple of swings and throwing it briefly up into the air. "Hiccup, I thought your other axe was a glove-fit, but now I'm holding this one, and it feels like â€| like it's part of my arm!"

She was beaming at him and the axe so hard that he couldn't help smiling.

"You like it?"

"Are you kidding?" Astrid said with a laugh, twirling the axe and then holding it to her chest like it was Woodnut. "This isâ€| thank you, Hiccup!"

And she was hugging him. Sure, there was the axe in the way, but â€| He smiled at her when she moved away, and she beamed back, still holding her axe rather too tight.

"Hey, you might want to â€| let up on that, a little?" he said. "The axe," he continued when she looked slightly bewildered. "It's sharp."

"Oh! Oh, right. Um." She looked down at the axe again, and he believed that was the first time he'd ever heard her stutter. "Well, I came down to see if you'd seen my axe, so this answers that and â€| dinner?"

"Oh, sure! I'm starving!" he said in relief, waving her forward while he closed up the stall, and breathing a sigh of mixed relief as they escaped the awkwardness. Hopefully his dad would be chatty tonight, because he wasn't sure he could take much more of that.

"Come on, Toothless," he said to his dragon, who was giving him a sleazy eye and knowing look. "Give me a hand to shut this all off so we can go eat."

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Astrid was singing a drinking song while beating Stoick's cloak outside the house on one of the only rain and snow free days they'd had that week, and the best thing was that she didn't even seem to notice. People passing by in the plaza looked up the hill at her giving the cloak a good thrashing, a grin on her face stretching from ear to ear and starting on the fifth stanza, and couldn't help grinning themselves. It had been a long time since Astrid had been seen in such a good mood, and passers-by were looking at each other knowingly.

Snotlout gave a smile, trudging up the hill with the stuff Hiccup had given him to deliver to her.

"Oi, nightingale!" he said teasingly. Astrid turned, and her smile faltered slightly. Their relationship had never mended, at least not completely, since he'd dragged her down this very hill by the hair. If he looked back now, he couldn't even believe that was him, doing

it to someone he had known and thought he would marry for nearly all his life. And Hiccup had forgiven him, in part. At least Hiccup was giving him the chance to redeem himself. Astrid was not that generous.

Still, he knew that he didn't deserve it, so if she wouldn't let him atone with her, he'd atone with Hiccup twice over.

"Lover boy asked me to get this to you," he said, holding a sack up. She took it from him and opened it, bringing out the notes he'd taken and the wood pieces that needed to be carved by her very precise hand. She looked disappointed for a moment, eyes moving on the note greedily as if looking for something, before folding it up and putting it in her pocket, hanging the sack against her belt and fingering the axe strapped to her back.

"Oi, that is some axe!" Snotlout remarked, leaning against the wall of the house as Astrid started beating at Stoick's cloak again. She gave him a sassy smirk that still set his blood running, but he reigned it in; he had far too much to make up for to let himself be sidetracked by things like that again. This hill was his witness, he'd make it up to her and his cousin.

"Made by the best blacksmith of the archipelago," she said, standing straighter with pride dripping from her voice as she kept at her task, looking like she was fighting a horde of enemies even while doing domestic chores.

"Well, don't kill anyone with it," he said, pushing off the wall with a salute and heading towards the arena. "Oh by the way, Hiccup said if you had the chance later, to come down with Stormfly to the academy. Gustav's been having massive trouble with his little one; he's got the sneezes, apparently."

"Oh no, I know what that is like with a naddar!" Astrid said, her laughter tinkling in the Winter air like ringing icicles on roof eaves. "I'll get some wormroot with me; tell him I'll be there." He left her with another salute, headed towards the arena. As usual, the dragon riders were being given tasks by their teacher there, who was supervising six or seven different activities at once as if he'd been born doing it, instead of being a clumsy oaf not half a decade before.

"Yo cuz!" he called out, entering the arena, then quickly ducking as another few spikes adorned the opposite wall. "Sheesh. I'm glad I'm such a great warrior, or I'd have turned into a Snot-spit right there."

"Just on time, Great Warrior," his cousin said in the usual no-nonsense attitude he always had when in the arena. The younger ones were lined up on one side, all of them trying to train a number of eager, shiny-eyed terrors who seemed unable to take their eyes off their trainers. Gustav was sitting down next to his nadder in one of the holding pens, worriedly rubbing his scales with some sort of ointment, while a number of adult riders were on the other side, some practicing target-shot, others doing some sort of close-quarter maneuvers without flight. Tuffnut was resting against a wall, not looking at anyone, with his arms folded and a sulky expression on his face.

"What's up with Tuff?" he asked right away, loud enough to make the male twin growl in his direction. The zippleback napping at his feet opened its eyes to look at Snotlout beadily, and he winced. Hiccup looked between them two with a grim expression, then threw an arm around Snotlout and pulled him away.

"He's the reason I need you here," he said without preamble. "Something happened in the Thorston family meeting yesterday; we don't know what, Ruff can't say and I think Tuff can't either, but it's left him in a bad way. I need you to take Ruff's place for a morning on Fart and Flatulence with him."

"What?" he said, not looking forward to spending time with a surely Tuffnut, as well as dreading the prospect of getting to know another dragon. He hadn't quite gotten over his love and loss for Fireworm yet, who was now without question the chief's loyal ride and guardian. He'd been cruel to her, too, but she had betrayed him first, and he hated to admit that it had marked him to see her fly away without him. Thinking of bonding with another dragon now filled him with an impending trepidation that it would happen again.

"This one's already bonded," Hiccup said, as if reading his mind. With his knowing look, it was probably that he'd just been observing Snotlout and come to his own conclusions. Not a happy thought. "Tuffnut needs to take whatever it is off his head, and Dad's decided that what's left of Troll Valley needs to be cleared of the most dangerous rocks that could cause a slide. I need you and Tuff to fly out there and take a look, then come back and report to council. You think you can do that for me?"

Snotlout grimaced, and then he folded his arms and nodded reluctantly. Hiccup slapped his shoulder with an honest thanks, calling Tuffnut over to give him some instructions. The twin nodded and got on Fart, leaving Flat to look at Snotlout questioningly, as if wondering why he wasn't blonde and female.

"Think of it as Tuff giving you a lift," was Hiccup's parting shot as he went back to the class, slapping the dragon's side. Tuff tacitly took off, and Snotlout clung on for dear life. He realised that he hadn't given Hiccup Astrid's message when they were half-way there, flying over the ocean that used to lead into the crescent-moon beach which no longer existed.

"Whoa, that's some mess we made, isn't it?" Snotlout said as they flew over it, the ground seeming to pass slowly beneath them for the speed they were going at.

"Yeah, all that lovely destruction," Tuff said with some of his usual upbeat love for devastation. "They're thinking of giving it another name now - should be up in the next meeting. I just hope it's something utterly awesome. Because by Thor I don't think I'll ever be in a battle like that again! Can you believe that we took on that thing, twice and we won!"

"Hell yeah! Of course we did! We're Berk Vikings, nothing can stand in our way!" Snotlout replied, letting go of the dragon's horns to punch the air, and diving to grab ahold of them again as soon as Flat's head started drifting to the right.

"It wasn't just Berk, that's the best part! The whole of the

archipelago took that thing down, all together in a show of force that will keep the skalds busy forever. And all those dragons, reaping destruction and mayhem! The nadders, the zipplebacks, the changewings..."

And Snotlout immediately noticed that Tuffnut became glum again, and he huffed. Damnit all, Tuffnut was fun to be with on the best of days, but when he got like this it was a real drag. He'd been like this for days when his sister got married, until he realised Fishlegs had no problem sharing his new wife with her brother.

He looked out over the ocean, pouting at the horrible company Hiccup had saddled him with (man, he did want to atone, but it was like trying to stab something with a spoon!) when movement in the sea caught his eyes, almost making him pull his dragon head up short before he remembered it was attached to another one. "Whoa! What in Thor's name is that!"

"What, what!"

Snotlout pointed, and they both swerved, going down towards the ocean where shapes and colours and flashes were passing under the surface. Both of them stood in their stirrups, trying to peer into the water over their dragon head, when off to one side a large column of water erupted out of the sea, spray taking them by surprise. Tuffnut, the more experienced rider of the two, pulled on Fart's horns, Snotlout lagging behind just long enough to get completely drenched, his dragon head laughing at him between his legs.

"What the â€|"

Snotlout quickly wiped the ocean water out of his eyes, and turned to see a number of massive sea dragon heads emerging from the water around them.

"Up, up, quickly!"

Tuffnut lead the upwards charge, Snotlout simply following and trying to avoid being flattened against his dragon's head by the speed they had accumulate. They leveled out through a cloud bank, peaking below the cover with only their dragon heads.

"Thor," Tuffnut swore. "Those are the massivest dragons I've ever seen - apart from the Red Death of course. And there are so many of them!"

"You're right â€|" Snotlout replied, losing count how many dragons there were after sixty-three. They weren't always the same shape either - some were flat, blue and spotted. Others had long, long necks with wedge-shaped heads. There were an enormous amount, and they were all headed towards Berk. "We have GOT to tell Hiccup this," he yelled at Tuffnut over the wind.

"On it! There's nothing but a couple of caves at Troll's Peak now anyway!" Tuff answered, and they both pulled the dragon away, headed back towards Berk.

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**Chapter one, introducing another major theme within this story.

Incidentally, the themes for all the epithets are The Forest, The Winter, Politics and Babies, or children in general â€“ after all, Gift of the Night Fury was all about babies, which fit deliciously into my continuity here. The theme of Forest and Winter are in the title â€“ Holt is a forest or a wood, and the over-arching theme of the Eddur is the Long Winter of the end of the world. The Babies? Well, apart from the inspiration of this - GOTNF â€“ Woodnut is far from the only sweet little babe that are going to try to charm the sweets out of everyone in this story.**

On the Feminist side: I would like to make one thing clear, here. Being a feminist to me does not mean bra burning and spitting at the feet of women who chose to quit jobs to have kids. Berk is an ideal feminist society to me â€“ the woman can do whatever she darn wants (within the limits of Viking culture that I've sneaked in). You want to be a warrior? Sure. You want to be a wife and a mum? No problem. You want to be both? Be my guest! Feminism to me doesn't mean career over all of it, or any other thing like that. It means that one has the right to **_choose**_**. **

Also, I began writing this in January, and I gave Goethi a pack of terrors because they seemed the best adapted to her needs. Then, lo and behold, we get a glimpse of Goethi in one of the trailers while Jay says that people with no dragons are in the minority, and **_she's surrounded by a pack of terrors**_**. I have powers, man. Now, if only my powers weren't telling me that Stoick is going to get the short end of the stick.**

4. Sickness

You may notice that this story will not progress quite as quickly as Becoming did â€“ after all, Winter is a long and plodding season. Action will not be forthcoming for a little while.

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><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

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><p>Chapter 2 - Sicknesses_

**Three-quarters of the sicknesses of intelligent people come from their intelligence.**

â€• _**Marcel Proust**_

"There you go, isn't that better?"

The tiny nadder, barely taller than Astrid herself, was lying on his belly, looking up at the girl with a whine and pleading eyes. Another warm cloth, steeped in herbs and fragrances from the steaming bowl, came down on the little things' head, resting just in front of the spike crest and down his snout. He thrilled in thanks, tired eyes falling closed.

Gustav was looking at Baldr with a desolated face, rubbing his poor

dragon's body and probably feeling utterly helpless. Astrid drew him into a hug and kissed his head, making the younger boy squirm uncomfortably; he didn't shrug her off, however. After a few moments, the young boy relaxed into her, fiddling with his own helmet in his hands.

"Will he be ok?" he asked in a thin voice. Gustav had been a bit of a bully in the past few years, his hero-worship for Snotlout having taken him down a sorry behavioural path. However, he was a slight boy, thin and gangly much like Hiccup had been at his age, swimming in his fur and tunic reaching his knees. Hiccup himself had beaten the bad attitude out of him with hard work and discipline, and it left the thirteen-year-old boy with a much sweeter disposition. Astrid gave his head a pat, letting the child be upset as it was the best sign. Little Baldr had become his constant companion, and Gustav's attachment to the dragon (as well as, Astrid secretly thought, his new hero-worship for the *right* man) was helping him grow into a better man than he would have.

The poor nadder, still so young, had caught the sneezes, which nadders sometimes suffered from this time of year according to Hiccup. Giving their scales a good rub with fish-oil and putting hot compresses with herbs on their snouts were the only remedies he'd used till now that had any success, though he'd been communicating with the Goethi (somehow) about what proper herbs to use.

Astrid rubbed Gustav's arm as the boy kept petting his nadder, who crooned up at him and shifted his spiny head into his tiny lap, taking all the space up. It was so sad to see, when one or the other of the dragons had begun ailing from the sickness, sometimes even the nightmares were affected (to much more disastrous consequences). But Astrid couldn't help thinking of Hiccup, out there on his own, stopping with whatever task he was doing to go help sick, wild dragons.

It made her feel warm, to think of it, and lucky that she had been engaged to a man with such kindness. He'd admitted himself that his life outside of Berk had been hard, that he had had to be on the ball all the time in order to survive, let alone live well. And yet here he was, knowing these cures because he had taken time out of precious preparations and training and travels to be as caring as Astrid knew him to be. That thought led to others; ones that sometimes made her to look at him and speculate, and wonder how he would be as a father.

As if on cue, the very man came around the barrier they had erected in front of the enclosure where Baldr was being kept (an idea she couldn't believe Hiccup hadn't thought of) to take all the escapee spine shots. Dartbolt was next to him looking anxious, her three terrors clinging to various parts of her body, while her younger sister Dartfoot was in Hiccup's arms, busy worrying her finger and a head tucked under his chin, with the ever present night fury peeking in behind them. She almost huffed at herself, but it gave her chest a jolt every time she saw him with a child in his arms - which seemed suddenly to be *way* too often, as between the new status of Hero of Berk, and Toothless' propensity to be found out playing with the children, he had become the little-ones' idol overnight.

"How's he?" Hiccup asked gently, bending on a knee and putting Dartfoot down next to her sister, who instantly took her hand.

"Baldr's still young; he needs more care than the others when he gets the sniffles." He was all business right away, passing a hand on the dragon's scales, who did not mind him one bit, and checking the horns and wings. "Hmm, you're doing a good job with the fish oil, Gustav, keep it up. But you're going to have to stay here the night; you have to keep at it, otherwise he'll be worse in the morning. Do you think you can do that, or shall I take him over for you?"

Gustav bit his lip and looked at them, having straightened out of his embrace with her after seeing the others arrive. "I don't want to go, but my mamaâ€|"

"I'll talk to her," Hiccup said. "Do you think she'll be opposed to it?"

"I â€| don't knowâ€|"

"It's alright," Hiccup said with a patient smile. "I'll go myself, and if she doesn't approve I'll come and tell you to go home. I'll take care of Baldr myself for you."

"But, sir!" Sir? Ha! Astrid gave Hiccup a look that went unnoticed, but her eyes traced over his face even more appreciatively than usual. Who would have thought, when that jaw came in, that he'd look â€|

"None of that. Baldr's health comes first." He stood, offering Astrid a hand she didn't need, but which she took anyway. "Dartbolt; straight home, you hear? I'm trusting you with your sister."

"Of course, sir," she said - there it was again! This time Hiccup did catch Astrid's eyes, and judging by how his cheeks coloured, the look she was giving him was rather telling, and she tried to smoothen her features out.

The two adults walked out of the arena, watching the younger children scampering off towards their homes. Already the sun had set, the long twilight taking hold as all the torches in the village shone starkly.

"Thanks for coming down," he told her as they made their way towards Gustav's hall. "I know how busy you are; you almost never catch a breath to go train or fly with Stormfly anymore, and now you wasted the last hours of light down here with us today." He looked thoroughly chagrined, and she couldn't help the smirk that rose to her face. Then he continued. "Sorry, to be such a hassle."

"Don't be ridiculous. I've been learning my fair share on nadders these last months. It's more than alright for you to ask your village and your friends for help," she said with a smile, changing 'family' for 'friends' at the last moment.

"That's not what I meant," he said quietly, looking at the darkened path. He took up a torch from a column, which Toothless kindled for him. "I've been â€| a bit of a bother, since I came back, between being another mouth to feed and all the â€|" He shook his left knee, his prosthetic jingling slightly as the metal bits clicked against each other.

"You are being ridiculous," she said, appalled. "What kind of

people would we be if your father or I held that against you? You did it for all of Berk. It's no chore at all." She blushed at her own vehemence, glad for the darkness, and continued. "Really."

He sighed, and Toothless gave him a nudge with his flat snout. Astrid looked on and waiting for the man to talk; as talkative as he used to be as a child, it was like waiting for raindrops to fall into her mouth in a light drizzle now. The darkness gave her courage, and she took his hand; when he jumped, she just squeezed it and smiled at him. He gave a half-smile back.

"I didn't mean it like that, either," he replied.

"You've forgotten how to make sense, then," she said with a teasing voice, and was gratified when he laughed.

"Yeah, I suppose. It's just â€œ|" He stopped, even stopped walking. "This is not easy to â€œ|" he waved the torch in front of his face eloquently as he blew a breath. "Ok. Well, the truth is, I got used to doing things on my own. It's been a long time, and I'm used to being â€œ| independent."

A cold hand gripped her chest, but she only nodded when he looked her way for a second. The fact that he pressed her hand in his helped.

"Dad's reinstated me as heir. In fact, he said it'd always stayed that way, but I took that from you." She shook her head and he looked at her seriously. "It's a responsibility I want to face, and I guessâ€œ| being back on Berk, and unable to do all those things I got used to doing, well, um, it's made me feel more than a little," he choked on the word, "useless."

Astrid stepped close to him before she could stop herself. "Hiccup, you never wereâ€œ|"

"Yes, I suppose everyone has their role," he conceded, though the sadness of his backhanded compliment to himself made her frown deepen. "But that doesn't change the fact that I need to find that sense of â€œ| doing things, again, under my own steam."

"And you will, you know," she replied, voice even. "You haven't changed at all since you left - same hard head that got you into trouble, same pig-headedness and determination not to listen, and same drive to do things you've always had. It's just your success rate that's taken a different direction." Saying that made her happy, for some reason.

"Thank you, for summing that up," he said wryly. She smiled at him, cocking her hip.

"You'll be fine, Hiccup, I know you will," she said with conviction, and he seemed to cheer considerably from her support. Ducking his head, he walked forward again.

"In any case, I have to make this afternoon up to you." He cut her off before she could protest. "No buts! If Gustav's mum doesn't want her son home, I'll give a hand with your chores. And she wants him there, I'll pitch in tomorrow, alright?"

"You have enough chores of your own," she replied with a shake of the head.

"And you gave a hand there today, so it's only fair. Come on, tit-for-tat?" He grinned at her, and she huffed but nodded, smiling back. In all honestly, her chest felt the lightest it had yet, and she became captivated by the twinkling stars that began to blink into existence above them. The silence for the rest of their walk was comfortable and warm despite the weather.

She let his hand go when Gustav's mother answered the door, feeling suddenly self-conscious of so much outward affection with a man who wasn't her husband yet. Their situation was particular, and so strange; any other couple would have been married weeks after the handsal and betrothal were made. Any courting would have taken place afterwards, with the contract sealed and dealt with, and the couple safely married. But they had been engaged for five years, him absent for all of them. Their contract was sealed, but they were not married. Astrid had moved into his house before he had ever known it, and now here they were, caught between two roles, unsure which rules guided their relationship behaviours, what was expected of them or allowed.

Gustav's mother most certainly wanted her son home, which caused Hiccup to sigh despondently, but nod and turn back towards the arena.

"You don't need to come all the way back with me," he said with one corner of his mouth in a smirk. Damn him, how good it looked on him. "Dad will be back from the docks soon, and he'll be hungry as a gronkle. Go home; I'll see you tomorrow, ok?"

"Baldr's health comes first, but don't you forget your own," she said quietly. He tilted his head. "You're doing great, Hiccup. Your mobility â€‘ You'll get there, you'll see. Just don't push yourself, alright?" She grabbed his tunic, visible under the half-armour he was wearing.

"Astridâ€‘" he began with a soft smile, and everything inside her seemed to melt. Between the darkness around them, cut only by his torch, the quiet and the privacy of a late Winter's night on Berk, it felt like she could do anything, especially if he kept smiling at her like that.

"Send Toothless with me," she said with a grin, already making plans at the back of her mind to join him in his night vigil of the sick nadder. "I'll put some supplies for you to pass the night in his saddle-bags. I won't let you spend a sleepless night on your- without comfort." Oh, darn it all!

Hiccup looked at her suspiciously, his green eyes shining in the torchlight in a way that told her he wasn't buying it.

"What are you planning?" he asked, and she knew she was caught.

"I'll stay with you," she said. "I can help with Baldr, because I've passed through it with Stormfly already."

"What, no!" he said, colour rising up his cheeks and stepping back.

"I'll be fine, trust me," he said in a softer voice, clearing his throat when she couldn't help looking as disappointed as she felt with his strong refusal. So much for that. "Look," he took her free hand, "I'm serious. You have dad to take care of too, and he's going to be tired and hungry. I'd feel better to know that he's been fed and settled. He's got a lot of pressure on him with The Thing so close at the moment, and we have to help him as best we can."

"You're a good son, Hiccup," she said, smiling as she shook her head, mollified and convinced. "Your father should really be proud of you."

He blinked at her, and for a moment she didn't realise how strangely her statement echoed the last thing she'd told him before he left. They stood there, looking at one another and at a loss what to say, before Astrid couldn't take the stasis anymore. She freed her hand from his, and punched him lightly in the side.

"Oh, aw, whatâ€!" he complained, looking at her with confusion and rubbing his 'wound'.

"Wuss," she teased, "that was for calling yourself useless." He gave a slight pout with sulky eyes. His lips were puckered - and a woman could only be expected to resist for so long. The hand in his tunic fisted, and as she pulled him down while she got on tiptoes, she kissed him. It was chaste, and short, but it set all her nerves on fire, and it was immensely gratifying to find his head following her down as their lips separated with a modest noise. She drew her bottom lip into her mouth, tasting a slight saltiness there that made her senses sharpen, and made her notice how he was looking at her lips with rather dilated eyes, how the crisp night air and torch-burn felt like breathing fine wine, and how good he smelled.

When he looked her in the eye, he blushed crimson however, and began throwing his eyes about. Toothless gave a rather vocal growl, beginning to trot away with a huff.

"That was for the axe," Astrid said, feeling suddenly awkward. Freya have mercy on her, what had possessed her! But she could still feel his lips on hers and â€| Freya's eyes, she- she wanted to do that again.

"Oh, oh right!" he said, waving the torch around aimlessly. After a few more seconds, he gave a stretch (was he doing it on purpose?!), a rather forced yawn and pointed after his dragon. "Right, um, I should really â€| erâ€| long night, you know, best- best get started and â€| stuff."

She almost giggled. Giggled. "Oh, yes, well. I have to go get to â€| taking care of dad - er, your dad, andâ€| stuff."

They looked at one another for a moment, before he thrust the torch at her. "You take this, I'll be fine, Toothless can see in the dark, and â€|"

"And he's left you behind," Astrid observed, this time really giggling as she fumbled with the torch like an amateur. Hiccup gave an 'ack' and ran off, stumbling in a way that finally did her in as she ran to the Haddock hall, energy she did not know she had pumping

through her, laughing long and hard for no apparent reason. Stoick kept looking at her funny while she cared for him with the utmost diligence, but seemed unable to bring her ludicrous smile and occasional chuckle under control. Toothless came and went, saddle bag and an extra package tied in twine stuffed with everything she could think of, from books to furs to food, both hot and cold. The dragon himself left after being sneaked a few of her best fishes, and after having gotten a kiss on the muzzle for good measure.

When she went to bed, her axe was polished carefully and lain beside her, with its head under her pillow and handle parallel to her in the bed, as always, for easy access and protection. Tonight, however, she fell asleep clutching it.

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Hiccup couldn't have slept if he wanted to that night.

She'd kissed him. Kissed him. Kissed him. If Thor called him up now, he'd probably be mightily annoyed. But he'd have a grin on his face that could only be described as obscene. He'd almost kissed her back, too, but then he'd seen her suck her lip into her mouth, and oh, gods in Asgard, if he'd kissed her then he would not have been able to stop. What would her hair smell like? What would her tongue feel like, warm and wet against his? And - oh gods, warm and wet!

He shuddered, trying to push the thoughts away and swallowing his thickened throat. The nadder beside him, his head in the human's lap, gave a gargle of discomfort, and Hiccup immediately began massaging the poor thing's snout. Toothless was lying behind him, taking a cat-nap, but mostly awake.

"Asgard," Hiccup whispered when the tiny one was settled, and Toothless opened one eye. "Sorry, bud, just he really couldn't stop the grin that spread his lips. "She kissed me, you know. For the axe, I suppose, but it counts! It's got to count!" His dragon gave him a toothless grin that looked ridiculous, and Hiccup returned it, probably looking just as utterly stupid while not caring a whit. He stroked the nadder in his lap fondly, Baldr thrilling a thanks as he purred, and then plonking out of consciousness as Hiccup carefully scratched him under the chin, putting him to sleep now that he was well enough to sleep safely.

His mind returned to musing and fantasising - he could kiss her in the morning, on the way out, maybe. A good morning, or a goodbye. A see you later? Hm, well, he wondered if she would kiss him when she brought him lunch - maybe not in front of the others, especially since Snotlout and Tuff would never let him hear the end of it. Well, and Tuff was also in whatever sticky situation he was in so then they would have to move to the side, somewhere quiet. And private.

And maybe this time she would let him kiss her properly. Feel her against him as he hugged her, soft and strong. Would she put her fingers in his hair, her arms around his neck? Would she say anything in his ear when he touched her, and how would her body feel under his palm-

He sat up with a start, staring wide-eyed at the opposite wall of the

enclosure. What on **earth** was he thinking! Astrid gave him one kiss, one! And he went about methodically undressing her in his head -

Bathhouse steam, toned, supple legs, blonde hair down, and long, long swathes of pink, puckered skin.

He shook his head, groaning into his hand as he tried to dispel the image of their first washday seared through his head again. Knowing what his beautiful Astrid looked like underneath her clothes was not helping him keep his head screwed on straight at all. He'd turned around so quickly that he'd forgotten his foot was undone, and he'd fallen and made a terrible scene out of it, when all he'd wanted to do is turn and give her some privacy. He hadn't been able to look at her without seeing her naked for a long, long time, and he could see her blushing when she came beside him as well - she'd probably noticed what an idiot she made of him in the bath-tub-

And oh gods washday. Washday was going to be a disaster. If he couldn't keep his head screwed on straight now, what was he going to do when he was naked, and she was dressed in a wet-plastered shift, skin showing through the transparent water-logged cloth?

He could already feel himself go stiff and uncomfortable. He'd been able to control himself, somewhat, to date (unless she had her fingers in his hair), but her kiss seemed to have opened a dam, with thoughts and wishes and desires flooding him from all sides. Sepha had been kind to him, aware of his innocence and ineptitude. They had taken comfort in one another and she had taught him how to please a woman, always teasing him that he would one day make his 'Astreed' call out his name the same way she had called her late husband's. All those things were coming back full force.

So now here he was, a horrible horny scoundrel thinking of her so inappropriately that she'd kill him if she knew (and he'd deserve it). He wasn't an innocent now, not anymore. His mind was making sure to show him every single thing he'd wished he were sharing with Astrid instead, every desire his mind had ever cooked up.

He settled back against Toothless with a huff, and the dragon rolled his eyes at him after giving him a sniff. "Yeah, I know, bud. Ignore it, ok?" he said, disgruntled that his own dragon was commenting on his horniness too. If only he could get in and out of the bath on his own, he could avoid so much embarrassment to her and himself that â€|

Now, wait a minuteâ€|

A few seconds later, he had charcoal and a journal out of Toothless' saddle bag. This might just work.

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The Goethi sat perched on her high stool, sorting herbs into bunches and then letting her pretty little terrors take them up to the hooks, hanging them headfirst to dry. She adored her little monsters, because they saved her so much work, and when she was feeling less spry than usual, they even grabbed her arms or clothing and carried her up or down the long flight of stairs to her house.

The first time she'd landed in the village, staff jangling and terrors flapping their wings to deliver her from the sky like a wrinkled up Valkyrie, she had cackled for days at how the people in the plaza jumped. Gobber had screamed like a little girl.

She had to do it again during the Thing. It would be fun to see if any of the chiefs behaved like sissy-girls in front of an old woman and a couple of half-krona dragons. She knew that Brawlknife from when he was a lad, always getting into scrapes with Stoick and Wolftooth when the Things were hosted on Berk. And his son was just like him, straight up drama-king and all around entertaining to watch as she made him squeak by reading his future with the most serious face, lights shady while rattling her staff.

She was still chuckling to herself over the memory of the last time she'd done that, with the Meathead heir clinging to Hiccup so the sceptical, smaller boy could barely breathe, when there was a soft knock on the door. Her little devils went to open it for her, all of them crowding around the new-comer like the brainless, happy things that they were. A particularly quiet one uncurled from her shoulder, sniffing, and Goethi knew who it was before she even looked up.

She smiled at Astrid, who carefully stepped through the gaggle of terrors with arms open for balance, laughing when a couple of them flew up to perch on her hands. The red one with green eyes perked up and flew towards her with a cry, and Astrid greeted it fondly as she let it climb onto her shoulders and nuzzle against her face.

"Hey there, Harbinger," she said in a murmur as the young girl walked towards Goethi, scratching its chin. "Been good today?" Goethi snorted; as if these little devils were ever 'good' - and that's the way she liked it. Harbinger was the only one with a name out of the terror pack that had congregated around the old healer, because she couldn't call them, so she never bothered to name them other than with distinct taps of her staff. She couldn't understand why Astrid had chosen such an ominous name, but she really didn't care to get Gobber to ask.

"Good morning, mother Goethi," the girl said, always the respectful lass. Goethi gave her a smile and a pat, the red terror travelling from Astrid back to hers and settling around her shoulders again. "I'm sorry to bother you this morning, but I've come for the herbs. I've run out, and that man won't come for them himself if left up to it, I just know it."

Goethi smiled up at her conspiratorially, causing Astrid to give her a sunny smile and bite her lower lip. With some help from her flapping dragons, she descended from her high stool and went to her jars, bringing out the necessary herbs and then smashing them into a paste as she added water and honey. Harbinger sniffed with interest, but all the terrors knew by now not to touch it unless she gave it herself. Luckily, her hives yielded plenty of the precious, golden syrup. Her mind was almost lost to musing before she spotted something unusual in the young maid's appearance.

Her hair was â€œ ah, it was up in milkmaid braids today, possible because she was elbow deep in flour at the mill, and the usual braid would get in the way, or could get caught in a wheel. It had the effect of uncovering her neck and giving Goethi a clear view of the axe head glinting behind her shoulder. She craned her neck, and once

Astrid caught the movement she surprised Goethi by blushing and tilting her body so that the elder woman could see better.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said, her voice taking on a girlish quality Goethi had never before associated with Astrid. "He made me a new one." There was no need for the old healer to be told who he was, and she chuckled, making the colour rise on Astrid's cheeks even higher. "Said it was nothing special, too! He's an idiot."

Goethi shrugged and waved her hand in resignation, making Astrid laugh sweetly again; it made Goethi's chest light. The poor girl had suffered loneliness long enough to atone for the same feeling she'd given Hiccup, and it was good to see them find each other at last. She waved a hand towards the axe and Astrid obligingly unholstered it, holding it just so in order to let her older, but sharper eyes have a look at it. The terrors were thankfully quiet (probably still nervous at the sight of a weapon), and Goethi began fingering the metal, polished to a shine and covered from blade to blade of the double-axe in intricate decorations indented into the metal with a black sheen. She ran her digits over them, noting some of the patterns presented bumps that were not immediately visible to the eye. She turned the axe sideways, letting the light from her windows fall on it at an angle, and she almost exclaimed in surprise.

Runes blazed into life, hidden on the inside of the blackened dents that made the knotted patterns. She waved Astrid closer, and the young girl's eyes flared as she found the wishes for strength and protection, prayers to Magni, Frigga and Thor shining to life as Goethi turned the axe just so, each arc sunken into the blade shining and spelling out it's secrets in the muted daylight glow.

When Goethi glanced at Astrid, she found her looking at the axe with half-lidded eyes, flushed cheeks, and a fond expression on her face that warmed the heart, as if she was looking at a favourite child. Goethi chuckled and gave her a knowing eye; Astrid blinked and blushed hard at being caught. Continuing to cackle in amusement, she turned back to her poultice and herbs. Oh aye, if the boy was courting her, he was doing it right. That wasn't just an axe, it was a love-letter in the shape of one.

Returning to the concoction she was making, Goethi dusted some powdered root on to dry it sufficiently and then wrapped it in a cloth, handing it to Astrid. The girl put it carefully in a pouch on her belt, then holstered her axe and stepped towards the door. Goethi was about to move back to her high stool when she saw Astrid falter.

"Mother Goethiâ€œ!" she began, going stiff with discomfort, wringing her hands. Goethi waved a hand for her to go on, and Astrid pursed her lips but continued. "I was at my old hall yesterday, and I noticed that Âttta, Agni's little one, seems to be coming down with â€œ a cough." Goethi stopped smiling right away, and Astrid paled. The old woman knew that Astrid was very fond of her young niece, named after her, especially now that the brother who had fathered her was dead. And little Âttta adored her implacable aunt. But a Winter sickness was not to be trifled with. Right away, she began gather another set of medicinal plants, putting them in her mortar and beating them vigorously. She tacitly pointed to a pot, and Astrid quickly complied, hooking it over the ever-blazing fire and adding water and whatever Goethi handed her. With quick hands for her old

age and arthritis she smashed the last few herbs together, adding some willow bark powder last to make sure it stayed potent. With gestures, she got Astrid to add the strong ale in the corner to the brew, and the strong smell filled the hut in no time; it was not unpleasant, but it turned both their stomachs, as the only time it was smelt was when there was a sickness in the village that needed to be fought.

Astrid was looking at the pot with hatred, and Goethi knew that she was remembering the last time she had smelt this; when Hiccup had almost been at Hel's doorstep, his fever riding high and almost taking him from them.

Goethi sighed silently, slipping from her stool at last. She should be used to it, really she should. She was so old that she had forgotten the name her mother had given her, and contented with her title of Goethi. But every time one of these wretched sicknesses broke out, it made her ill with fear. And somehow, it was always an old friend, or one of these sweet little younglings, who always gladdened her day when they came up to her house to do chores for their parents ...

And poor Ætta, barely three summers old â€|

Goethi tapped the stone grate to get Astrid's attention, and quickly wrote a few symbols that were universally recognisable, and was very sorry to see Astrid go paler.

"Quarantineâ€|?" Her voice shook, looking at Goethi with fearful eyes. "Surely it can't be that bad â€|"

Goethi merely shook her head. Astrid bit her lip, then glanced at her axe worriedly.

"Should I also be â€| I went to visit." The old healer walked up to her, gave a tug in her tunic and waiting for the girl to bend diligently to her height. She examined her eyes and mouth, and although it may be too soon to tell, she looked like she had withstood the exposure well. Still, Hiccup had only been eight weeks out of bed â€| Quickly, she shuffled over to the pot and ladled some into a cup, force-feeding it to the girl boiling as it was. She gagged, but drank it. The old woman then filled a large bottle with it and gave it to Astrid.

"I'll tell Stoick, then. How am I to get this to them, though?" Goethi made another well known symbol. "Mother? So mother can come in and out?" She nodded; Brunhilda was a woman of exceptional constitution, probably due to the amount of apples she was constantly munching on, and cider she drank. Still, much like the Goethi herself, she was one of the few who could withstand most illnesses. "What of the rest?"

Goethi thought about it and wrote down a few simple runes. Astrid squinted at them slightly, before nodding.

"Very well. All those who have been in constant contact with her â€| and will it be a week, or more?"

The exchange continued, until Astrid was satisfied that she had all the instructions she needed to give her mother. With a sigh, the

young girl rose from the kneeling position she'd taken to read the rickety and uneven runes that Goethi wrote - no one had ever taught the old woman how to write, so she'd had to make up her own squiggles after her vow of silence.

"One â€| one last thing," she said, stopping at the door. "Are you sure that I am safe? For â€| you know, for Hiccup."

The Goethi smiled up at her with a nod, and Astrid left, shutting the door behind her quietly. The old woman kept looking at the door pensively as she got back onto her high stool, once again going back to the job of sorting her herbs, even as the smell of the sickness brew filled her hut.

Perhaps, it was about the time to train someone new how to do that, too.

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"Over there!"

Hiccup and Toothless swerved together, cutting the air at the lead of the small pack of dragons in his scouting troupe. Snotlout was once again borrowing Flat's head, who still seemed somewhat puzzled that his rider had somehow morphed into a male. Fishlegs was bringing up the rear, Meatlug keeping up only just, but giving the burly man enough time to take notes and map their course.

Icy Winter wind cut through the eye-holes of his helmet, making his eyes water. It was impossible to miss the spectacle before them, however, as a seeming endless stream of water dragons passed beneath the surface of the ocean, all letting out their keening calls and flopping up in a splashing arc when they saw their dragons, as if in greeting.

"Scouldrons," Hiccup said, to his team, listing off the ones he was seeing. "Thunderdrums, Sidewinders â€| aaand an Oceanzap, great. Up, guys!"

He pulled on Toothless, and his friend stiffened his wings and stalled right away. The other riders around stopped more sedately, circling around to come back around the night fury. They rose upwards, and Hiccup hovered in the high winds over the sea dragons, now swimming a distance below, and noticed that Meatlug, especially, seemed to be looking at the dragons with longing.

"Hm, I've never seen this before," he said, and the other three men looked at him with worry. "It almost looks like a migration."

"A migration?" Fishlegs said, sounding slightly worried. "I didn't know sea dragons migrated?"

"Neither did I, and none passed by my island while I was there. Then again, I either wasn't there, or was too busy trying to keep warm this time of year. And they're passing far enough from Berk to be missed by any madman out in a fishboat during this time of the cycle."

"They don't seem to be headed for Berk," Snotlout said, still standing in his stirrup as he looked after the weaving shapes under

the choppy waves.

"No, they seem rather to be moving past it, towards the South." He folded his arms, sitting up in his saddle as he chewed his lips in thought. "Well, I'd best tell dad. The ships from Hopeless will be coming through this route."

"Do they have dragons?" Tuffnut asked as they turned towards Berk, wind from the North in their face once again. Hiccup shook his head.

"I didn't go there. It was â€œ too close," he said, and left it at that, urging Toothless on faster.

He luckily avoided all other comment, not daring to look at Fishlegs' face when they landed. Asking Hoark as he passed by, he found out his father was helping Mulch near the mills, and quickly made his way there. The grain was being ground and stored as flour in some quantities deemed enough to cater for the visitors who would soon invade Berk. Hiccup walked up behind his father, who was counting the sacks of oats and grain that were entering the mill as Mulch ticked them off on parchment, Silent Sven standing by with folded arms. Toothless trotted off, no doubt in search of someone to bribe out of a fish or two with pleading, dilated eyes.

He took his helmet off, running a hand through his hair and throwing it under one arm as he tapped Stoick on the arm. His dad turned towards him and smiled.

"Back so soon?" he said, almost genially. The day's chores must be progressing swiftly and well. Hiccup felt his back go rigid as he reported to the village chief; old habits die hard.

"Yes, sir," he said, almost blushing when it escaped his mouth, and some giggling came from the door of the mill. He looked in to spy a gaggle of women and maids, all wearing clothes appropriate to mill-work and hard at it, then shook his head and returned to the matter at hand. "There was another pack of sea-dragons, this time larger than the last according to 'Lout and Tuff. There were various species that don't usually tend to be together, but they were more or less of the same size. They don't seem about to stop here, but it may be a bit risky to let the fishing boats out right now. And they seem to be on the route South, so I'm not sure if they'll stop to create mayhem at Hopeless."

His dad gave him a shrewd look over his mustache. "You intend to go see whether this meyhem has taken place, then?"

Hiccup puffed a breath, back still rim-rod straight as he considered it. "Not overtly. I don't want to expose us too much. Cami and Thug sent letters to say that most of them are coming by dragon for the Thing - so I think they're ready to disclose the secret to all the allied tribes now that â€œ er â€œ the battle let it out, shall we say. Seeing how fast the dragons are, they'll be here before everyone else â€œ probably to get this decision out of the way before others come. If I go exposing this before there's been a collective decision made â€œ" He shrugged. Stoick put a hand on his shoulder.

"Spoken like a true future chief," Astrid said as she exited the mill, patting flour off her clothing. Hiccup openly stared; her hair

was up in two braids wrapped around her head, her armour missing. She was in a simple woolen tunic that reached down to her mid-tie, her usual leggings covering her down to her boots. This new, domestic Astrid had him almost gasping as he simultaneously wished he was looking into his own future, and couldn't quite believe that he was seeing Astrid. She was giving him a smile and a look through her lashes that made his insides melt until they felt like his chest had gone concave inside his ribs, and his skin flushed hot. Ah, Freya's heart, he was utterly pathetic, a puppet in her hands whose strings she could tug at will and leave happiness or heartache behind.

"Off already?" Stoick asked neutrally.

"I'm going to speak with mother," Astrid replied, a frown lowering her brows. "And taking some flour - I've traded with Sven separately."

"Never a doubt, my dear," Stoick said with a smile.

"I'll come with you," Hiccup said before he could stop himself, giving his dad the helmet and hefting the sack before she could argue.

"I don't!" Astrid looked at his father, who shrugged. Hiccup turned back to her with a tilted head and she sighed, coming close to him.

"My niece is sick. Goethi put her in quarantine as a precaution, and mother is in contact with her all the time." She looked up at him, worrying her lower lip, and it took all of him not to kiss it from between her teeth.

"I'm not that much of a wuss," he replied, ducking his head so that only she could hear, and feeling immensely gratified when she blushed scarlet. He could make her go that colour; it was an achievement not many could boast of. "And while I'm not the strongest Viking around, I've never even had the Winter and Summer fevers."

She sighed. "Fine." She reached out tentatively, as if to take his hand, but dusted more flour off her tunic instead. He hefted the sack, and she tried to reach for it, but he danced out of her reach and caught her wrist. He didn't let go.

"Nope, as long as I'm around, I'll spare you this," he told her cheekily, fully expecting a punch to the shoulder, but he had his armour on. A chorus of 'awww' startled him, and he found a number of girls, older and younger, peeking out from the mill, Silent Sven looking like he was mildly exasperated. When he realised he'd had an audience while he openly flirted like a true-bred idiot, he felt his face go hot. His dad was giving him that look where he was obviously smiling under his beard, and Hiccup swore that if he wiggled his brows like Gobber loved to do, he he didn't know what, but it wouldn't be pretty.

Astrid, however, seemed to take a different approach to things. Her cheeks were flushed too, but judging by the furrow in her brow and the thunder in her expression, someone was going to get hit - probably him. He flinched when she reached for him, but instead of a fist to somewhere soft and tender on his body, her hand slid out of his grasp, her arm slid through his elbow, and she glared at the

other mill girls, dragging him off.

Oh wow â€| well, they did have a contract, so it didn't have to be about feelings, but she'd kissed him yesterday, so maybe she did have some regard for him? Enough to be a teeny bit jealous?

Whatever it was, he was positively strutting, crossing the village with her on his arm. Anything that made her walk arm-in-arm with him was worth it.

The sigh she gave dampened his mood, however, and he looked down at her to find a rather long face; not very encouraging, but he got the impression that it may not be connected to him from the way she kept leaning into his side, almost seeking comfort. He pressed her elbow to his waist softly. When she looked up at him, he raised a brow, and she evaded his eyes for a while but he insisted quietly until she desisted.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm just so worried about Åtta, that's all. She's only three summers old, and the Goethi startled me, when she put her to bed. I thought it was only a cough, something honey and mead and a few herbs can get rid of, butâ€|"

"I'm sure she's just being cautious, because of the Thing," he tried to reassure her, but he was startled to see Astrid suddenly blush furiously as a hand rose to wipe a tear off her cheek savagely, her eyes going redder as they overflowed.

"It's just thatâ€| she's only three. She's not going to understand why she can't go out to play with the other children, or why the medicines taste bad, or why she can't even go to the outhouse when we've just trained her out of the potâ€|" She bit her lip almost cruelly as he watched her with wide eyes, and he could have sworn she swallowed a sob. "Oh Frigga, this is ridiculous!"

She tore her arm away from him, stomping towards the back of a barn. Hiccup followed her instantly and found her hugging her middle, leaning against the wooden structure.

"Hey," he said in a soothing voice he'd learned while dealing with wounded fire-breathing beasts. This wasâ€| not all that different, actually. He'd never seen Astrid this vulnerable, and he respected that. "Astrid."

"No, it's alright, I'm being ridiculous," she said, but it was obviously forced. Wordlessly, and very, very gently, he turned her around. Her cheeks were still blotchy, her eyes red and tears were streaming down her face. Her entire body was rigid, and she was looking at his belt with angry conviction. He carefully reached for her face to see if the gesture was desired, but when she didn't move (and didn't twist his hand off) he cupped her cheek and swiped the tears away.

The gesture seemed to undo her as she closed her eyes, gave a sob and stepped forward into his chest. He went rigid at first, his arms coming up almost of their own volition as the sound of her soft sobbing hit his ears

"Åtta's so small. And so many children her age who get the sickness don'tâ€|"

"Shh," he said softly, putting a hand on the back of her head and wishing more than anything that he wasn't wearing his armour. He didn't dare press her to it, and her hand rose to his chest but found no purchase in the hard leather other than a cold buckle. "I'm sure she'll be ok. You caught it early and she'll get lots of love and care, I'm sure." He paused, letting her cry quietly. " â€| she's really important to you, isn't she?" he murmured.

"She's named after me, I'm her godmother," she choked out, already evening her breathing. Hiccup's hand rubbed her back and head, and he bent down to put his cheek on her tied braids, almost wishing he could shield her completely. "She's this â€| wee little thing, with bright eyes and two braids coming down her back, my old helmet and a toy swordâ€| "

"Sounds like someone I know," he said, trying to keep his voice light. Astrid gave a blubbery laugh. "I'd like to meet her."

"Maybe after," Astrid said, her voice back in control; she moved to look at him, but didn't push out of the circle of his arms. She wiped her cheeks against her shoulders until Hiccup brought his hand up and did it for her. Astrid sighed, leaning into his palm and looking up at him with an expression that made his chest hurt. "She can't come out for a week at least, and if all goes well and she's ok, she's going to be so sorry that we've punished her for nothing. A little bit of time with Toothless and the other hero of Berk will cheer her right up."

Hiccup chuckled along with her. The situation with the poor little child sounded so horribly dire â€| he wished there was something he could do but the medication he knew was limited, and mostly self-taught. He doubted he knew something Goethi hadn't already forgotten about. Still â€| he raked his brain, trying to think of anything he used when he'd had fevers.

Astrid distracted his thoughts with a sigh, relaxing into his embrace and resting her cheek on his breast-plate. Egged on by how close to her he felt at that moment, he leaned down slightly, and kissed her on the forehead. She didn't look angry, or annoyed that he'd overstepped their boundaries. Her slightly swollen eyes were half closed as she leaned her cheek further into his hand.

"Thank you, Hiccup," she said. "For this."

"Hey, it's no big deal." He lowered his forehead to rest it against hers, pushing the loose hair out of her eyes first. "I mean it." He swallowed thickly as he looked at her, words he wanted to say stuck in his throat.

But â€| if Astrid had the courage to be this vulnerable with him, if she didn't mind him seeing her at her weakest â€| granted, she already had that advantage over him, seeing him recover as she had, but â€| the least he could do was trust her with his softer sides, too, wasn't it? Believe that if she could open up to him and know he wouldn't judge her for it, that she would do the same.

"I'll always be there for you, Astrid," he said finally, almost choking on it when she looked up at him with wide eyes. "Whether you want me to or not," he said, adding a bit of humour to his voice, and

gladdened when she chuckled. "Especially when you don't want me to. In fact, you'll probably start finding excuses to spend time with Toothless soon." She laughed again, and he felt like he could take on the Red Death again, on his own, and win. "Ok, so we need to get your mum this flour before any more of it gets lost on the windâ€|" "

He untangled himself reluctantly, looking around for the sack he hadn't even realised he'd dropped and hoisting it up again without surrendering his hold on her completely. He pressed her into her side, where she stayed willingly, and they almost fell over until they could coordinate their step, flesh feet and metal foot nearly tangling. Astrid rested her head against his shoulder, one arm around his back and the other on his waist, while he had his arm securely around her. She didn't seem to care who saw her like that, and in that moment, neither did he. He was too worried about her.

But there was one thing he could do. Once he got her safely to her mother's hall, he and Toothless were going on a roundtrip to Thor's rock.

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There is something I would like to point here. While I was writing this story, I tried in many, many ways to get Astrid to cry for herself. Thor knows she will have reason to on more than a few occasion as I took an ice-pick to her heart. However, she summarily refused, the scene devolving into drivel or else veering entirely off course every time I tried. And yet, Astrid has cried at the drop of a fish for other people. It made me like her character even more.

5. Surrounded

In which a different household has a different sort of domestic bliss, and Hiccups' corny cheesiness comes to light â€|

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><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

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><p>Chapter 3 - Surrounded_

**I was surrounded by friends, my work was immense, and pleasures were abundant. Life, now, was unfolding before me, constantly and visibly, like the flowers of summer that drop fanlike petals on eternal soil. **

â€• _**Roman Payne.**_

Fishlegs gratefully put the keg down, taking a moment to lean backwards against the dragon that was sitting just behind his bench. Meatlug was snoring lightly, tired from all the heavy lifting, but at least, this morning they had completed three of the six halls they were preparing for their visitors. Even though the dragon peace had

taken hold nearly three months ago, it had not been enough time to get out of practice; they were used to it. It used to be old village, lots and lots of new houses.

As per Stoick's orders, the halls for the Meatheads, and UglyThugs and the Bog women had been erected first, and only the ones for Hopeless, the Trollguts and the Berserker tribes were left to do, and the foundations for those were lain at that. All down his table were the rowdy Ingermann men, together with the lumberjacks and Gobber. Hiccup hadn't come back in - probably either at home or in the arena, or out with Toothless. Or maybe with Astridâ€!

Fishlegs took another sip, making a mental note to ask his friend how things were going in that department. As a married man, now, he was positive that he had at least 58% more advice to give Hiccup than any of the other men their age, and that though Hiccup was undoubtedly versed in the art of â€ being with women, by now, with all his travels, there was something to be said about having a wife.

Once one got used to her very grabby hands, that was.

Chuckling at the memory, Fishlegs was distracted by a sudden burst of raucous laughter down his table. Perking up, he noticed that Hoark - and his nightmare - seemed to be telling an amusing story.

"...and there he was, covered in honey and angry bees, looking mighty pleased with himself!" Everyone around the table laughed as the nightmare held his head high, still more than a little puff-chested at whatever it was. "My little Buttermilk has never wanted for honey since. Up he gets and goes get it for her whenever she cries like the wee bairn she is; don't you boy!" The green nightmare gave a confirming puff of smoke through its nostrils, looking as smug as any lizard could and sending the table into another round of loud guffaws and table slapping.

"Aye, amazing creatures, they is," said another man - ah, Odarr the Oddhead. "Never know how we managed without them before. Just the other day, I was carrying my cart full of whale oil barrels, and off one of them goes, tumbling off the cart and off a cliff. If my dear nadder hadn't gone after it, I'd have wasted a third of the afternoon's work, and then we'd be short of oil by the Winter's end."

"Hear hear, to think we hunted these poor bastards," Hoark said, reaching up to scratch his nightmare, who purred and simply looked at Hoark adoringly. The Viking snickered, bringing the dragon's head nearer for a rub.

"And I owe you three chickens, by the way," Bilge said, waving his keg at another of the group - Knob the limber carrier. "My wife is going to tan my hide until it's see-through for it, but a wager's a wager, that it is."

"What's this about a wager no one's let poor old Gobber in on?" the blacksmith asked, looking beadily at them. Bilge laughed.

"Knob and I had an argument last week on how smart they is, these lizards. See, he said they were plenty smart enough to be par with a six year old, and you know that's my own Gunthar's age. So we shake on it that I'll get my zippleback to do all the chores Gunther does,

and see how well they follow instructions. The wife and I, we go out there, tell our heads what to do, and my little boy looks on mighty pleased as they do all his chores for him. Now I'm in trouble, because he wants one of his own, and Master Hiccup said he wasn't letting anyone into training that wasn't at least 8 years old."

"Aye. reasonable enough. That's the age I gave my eldest, Dragonfly, her very own axe." Hoark said with a nod. "Wanted to be just like her mother, that lass."

"I suppose, but it's made me really think," Bilge replied, and once the obligatory jeers were out of the way about how thinking was dangerous, he shook his head almost sadly. "I've seen Master Hiccup's night fury with the children, and your nightmare now with the honey. All these years, generations even - but they be nothing more than children in their heads."

"Aye," Knob replied. "Hit me hard too, that did, when I realised. But they gave as good as they got, and we got rid of their evil monstrous thing for them. I say we call it square and move forward."

"Ale to that!" Gobber said, holding up his keg-hand. Everying followed and called for more alcohol while Fishlegs reached around to rub Meatlug's nose. His girl had become part of his family, like Ruffnut had birthed twins. The gronkle was so fond of her family that the only times she ever became aggressive was when she thought they were threatened. It had been amusing to see Meatlug thrash the bale of hay she had somehow mistook for a large, unfamiliar dragon, and Ruffnut had certainly enjoyed the show, egging her on. And then his chubby little girl with scales had come up to them, tongue lolling and eyes dilated, looking up expectantly for praise with a look on her face that clearly said, 'look what I did! I saved you all!'

The conversation beside him had moved to the advantages of using plant oil over fish oil to fry mutton when Hiccup slid into the bench beside him with a sigh. Ever present, he was followed by Snotlout and Toothless, Tuffnut bringing up the rear.

"Hey, Fishlegs," Hiccup said in a tired by cheerful voice. Judging by the burns on some of his clothes, and the red, bitten nose Tuffnut was sporting, there was certainly a story behind their afternoon. "We're just back from the arena - we missed you there. Soaptaste took in the new purple gronkle that wandered in from the hills yesterday, and she was asking what was the best way to treat his skin. I usually used yak-fat on Meatlug when I had her, but she's been looking better since she's been with you."

"Oh, thanks Hiccup!" he said happily, and Meatlug gave him a lick. "Just mix the fat with water and vinegar - it seems to work well on those little bugs that get caught between their scales. And I had those wooden brackets you asked for delivered at your hall."

"Brilliant, I'll pass it on; and that's great to hear!" he replied, nodding in thanks to the barmaid, Lauga, as she put down a plate of mutton and gravy in front of him. Then he sighed at the plate. Tuffnut glared at her for some reason. "I'll miss Astrid's food tonight. This just doesn't compare anymore."

Fishlegs listened without interrupting as Snotlout and Tuffnut launched into the various episodes of the 'Disasters in the Kitchen with Astrid', and bringing out his pipe, he filled it thoughtfully at how brightly his friend's eyes shone when Tuffnut starting describing - with rather too much drama - the first attempt she'd made at yak-milk yogurt, and what repercussions it had on anyone eating it. Hiccup turned several shades of green, pushing his mutton towards Snotlout who eagerly stole a few morsels before pushing the plate back towards his cousin.

They were discreet, but Fishlegs was quick enough to note the way in which a few of the surrounding people were looking at Hiccup while he defended Astrid's food, and how Snotlout enjoyed playing the devil's advocate in order to see how red he could get his cousin when his vehemence was pointed out. The village, for obvious reasons, had become irrationally invested in the life of their new hero, and his relationship with his promised had been the topic of dreamy gossip for the girls of the village, as well as speculation and bets by the men. Fishlegs and Ruffnut had stayed out of it (it was only fair; they knew exactly what was going on), but it had been both worrying and entertaining to hear some of the men swear they saw Astrid walk funny, or that Hiccup's eyes lingered on her arse a little too long to be innocent. The large blond snorted, lighting his pipe, and wondered at how now, suddenly, they had time to think on such things, when before every day was a race against time to gather the crops, fish, dry the food, preserve as much as possible, and hide it.

It was a strange place, Fishlegs mused, this village where they were going to be celebrating the Winter holiday with those who only last year had them raising axes with killing intent. There simply wasn't a word to describe how strange and displaced it felt sometimes, when he tried to picture himself this time last year, and then saw himself now, and could not, for the life of him, imagine life on a different Berk. Hiccup was back, smiling happened a lot more often for quite a lot of people, and the dragons had joined their families.

Meatlug rumbled, and he gave her ear a scratch. Taking a puff of his pipe, he started blowing smoke-rings, which Tuffnut and Snotlout instantly began trying to aim through with pebbles, soon to be joined by several of the other men on the table. The men laughed, the women passing by shook their heads in mock exasperation, and the dragons began blowing their own smoke rings to join the fun.

All in all, it was looking to be the best Snoggletog Berk had ever had.

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Ruffnut huffed, rocking Woodnut more gently in her hands than anyone would have thought possible for her just a year ago. Hel, she didn't think it was possible for her to be gentle, and yet look at her. She had turned into a soft, mushy porridge, and her little girl just had to look at her with her big eyes after she was born.

And Fishlegs. And her dragon. It was her fault for collecting gas-monsters. Now she was a mushy porridge.

A mushy porridge who was feeling sorry for her brother, and so was allowing him to bother her and sleep in her hall and spend almost all day with her and Woodnut, when he wasn't hiding in the arena

with their dragon.

"Go on then, do it," she challenged, and her brother got that old look of glee in his eyes and ordered his dragon to sit on him, proving that he could take it every bit as much as Snotlout could. She was supposed to keep the time but ¢ she was never really good with numbers - and always very good at outsmarting her brother.

At least it was good to see him smiling that wicked smile of his again. As long as that stupid, worthless woman kept away from him, then there was absolutely no problem; the slut.

She'd had her eye on Ruff's brother since the female twin had gotten married; without her there to deter possible advances, and too busy as she was trying to build her new household, even with Astrid's help, there had been no stopping the hounds for circling the meat. And despite his apparent stupidity, her brother was probably a goodly looking slice of ham to most other girls in the village. He was a warrior, one of Berk's first dragon riders, a close friend of the current hero and coming from the moderately wealthy Thorston clan.

Not that he'd made it easy; Tuff had always been somewhat stupid on girls, probably because of her. Girls were men with boobs to him, pretty much equal and not too interesting. He'd flirted a few times, sure, but it had mostly been posturing, and a none-too-subtle competition with Snotlout, back when he was so much of an ass that Ruffnut often called him Buttmouseout.

Then Cami had blown everything up around Tuff - quite literally - and suddenly women were an object of interest. Or rather, one woman. And the other girls on Berk had not enjoyed watching another of their prized bachelors be seized up; by a foreigner, no less. One, in particular, had decided to do something about it and come forward with claims of words given and promises made which had painted her poor brother into a corner.

Ruffnut still felt her blood boil at the thought; her stupid parents and her stupid clan had made all the wrong decisions, and they had even made her swear that she would not intervene, swear on her little girl's head. How they would dare enforce any claim they had on her, seeing that she was an Ingemann child, she didn't know, but the Thorstons were fanatical idiots about their honour, and with the Dragon War ended the quest for honour had transferred itself from battle to other spheres; social standing, wealth and marriage. She didn't know what her grandfather would order, and she wasn't about to risk her little girl. The stupid talks of honour and pride and clan duty had often driven her and Tuff out of their minds as youths, and half the yak-tipping episodes had occurred because they wanted to see their grandfather's vain throb against his forehead.

Ruffnut almost wished they'd managed to kill him with the stress. She had gotten a good bargain - her own hall, freedom from the Thorstons, her little gas-monster number two, and a very decent man for a husband. And Tuff's prospects had been so much better, looked so much brighter, just a month ago. But if their stupid, decrepit grandfather would just croak, the problem would at least be partially solved. That their own mother had taken grandfather's side, however, had been unforgivable, and Ruffnut had not spoken to her at all for the past weeks, negotiating with Stoick about revoking her rights as

godmother. Asgard knew Astrid deserved it more.

Speak of the devil, just as Tuffnut was beginning to catch on to the fact that his sister had 'forgotten' to keep time, Astrid walked in, looking utterly knackered, followed by Ruff's dear husband. Both of them stopped, staring from the back door of the house to the enclosed paddock beyond where Flat and Fart were affectionately rubbing their chest against a protesting Tuffnut.

"Come on, take it like a man, or Snotlout's better than you!" she egged on.

"No way! Flat, Fart, don't you dare move!"

"Do I dare ask?" Fishlegs said, taking Woodnut out of her arms

"Just trying to cheer him up," she whispered back, a grin on her face. "Astrid, here's your man's vest. Tell him thanks - but wash it before you give it back. I think she had a go at it with her mouth before I could get it away."

The collar was indeed crusty and dried, making Astrid grimace fondly - if such a thing was possible. Children made you do the oddest things. "I'll just say this. I'm just glad tomorrow's washday."

"I'll bet you are," Ruffnut replied, and receiving a kick in the shins for it that was totally worth it. She was going to hear about it tomorrow - but she was so going to ask for details, because Astrid was blushing more than usual.

"I'll bet my man Hiccup is," Tuffnut said with an obscene grin. "Though I'll admit, I don't know why. But I'm getting a generally dirty minded vibe here, and I like it."

"It's not like that, he just likes clean clothes," Astrid protested lamely. Ruff saw Fishlegs hide his face behind his hand as he lit his pipe, a gesture not altogether successful as his quivering lips were still visible. He got an elbow in his gut for his troubles.

With a huff, Astrid took her axe out of its holster and sat down, the handle now long enough to make sitting in anything but a backless stool or chair uncomfortable. She held it like a staff in front of her and began twirling it, humming to herself.

Ruffnut's eyes could have popped out of their sockets. When Phlema said that she had heard Astrid singing some days back she'd thought the woman was barking mad or flat-out drunk. But here she was; humming.

Oh, yeah. Wait until Brunhilda heard about thisâ€| tomorrow was going to be the best, washday, ever!

"He's gotten better, hasn't he?" Fishlegs commented, of course being nice and ignoring the humming. Tuffnut was too occupied being squashed (the axe made Flat-Fart nervous, so they'd curled up around the idiot as if he could protect them from an angry Astrid. Ha! - as if), and Ruffnut didn't care to speak yet. She would get her own tomorrow, with Astrid's awesome mum as backup.

"He's always been good, but you're right, he got better," She tilted her axe, looking at it proudly. The day's light was gone, and only the fire pit and the torches in their brackets remained. The axe flashed as various parts of it caught the lights from the different sources, and Ruff caught her brother following it like it was a forest nymph. "And look; Goethi spotted them."

Astrid eagerly tilted her axe, looking excited and ignoring Tuff's complaint that he couldn't see. Fishlegs' eyes widened and looked at her, but she shook her head.

"Should I be going 'woooow, that's awesome!' right about now?" Ruff asked, giving them all a non-plussed look for leaving her out of the brainy-loop. She would be the first to admit that while she could beat her husband's ass (and oh, that gave her ideasâ€œ) and hold her own against Astrid, they both outstripped her in the thoughts department. Astrid seemed not to bother with her tone, however - she seriously looked like a child getting her first axe - and tilted it further.

"They have to catch the light. Look better; look at the design!"

Ruffnut grabbed the handle impatiently, causing Astrid to suddenly look litigious, but Fishlegs' large hands held it steady between them, and after softly asking her to tell him when she saw something, he began to rotate the axe's double blade on it's own axes, both women holding it up by the handle. Ruffnut's eyes scanned the thing, and then suddenly she saw Magni, and then Frigga. Her limited vocabulary caught other runes she couldn't read well, but most of them seemed to be â€œ|

"Prayers?" she asked.

"Aha!" Astrid nodded. "He snuck in blessings and prayers for strength. How he ever managed to burn a single layer of metal like this I don't know, but here and here - see? - he managed two. I'm sure Gobber doesn't even know how to do this. He couldn't even repair my axe handle."

"Don't say that in front of him," Fishlegs said, still looking at the axe head with his pipe in his mouth. "He'll take it as a challenge and I do not want to see what he'd do to our weapons to prove you wrong. Hang onâ€œ|"

He took the axe away from them both (and suddenly Astrid looked a step away from murder), and then held it up closer to the flames. He hemmed and hawed, oblivious to the rising danger while Ruffnut sat back and waited for it to explode, and Tuffnut tried to struggle out from beneath their dragon (wuss) so he could enjoy the forthcoming show better. But alas; they were to be disappointed (and she was not to become a widow today).

"Yeah, he wrote in blessings alright," Fishlegs concluded, waving everyone next to him. Astrid crowded him instantly, taking a firm hold of the axe handle and tugging, but Fishlegs made a placating gesture. "Look at the blade here; look, at this angle in the light. It's a DrÃ³ttkvÃ¶tt- rather well hidden, too."

"A what?" Tuff asked. Fishlegs frowned at him.

"A _DrÃ³ttkvÃ¶tt._ A poem; six lines long, six syllables, lots of complicated rules how it's supposed to look like ¦ Hiccup would know how to write one of these because he's the chief's son. Seriously, was I the only one who ever paid attention?"

"I remember what it is," Astrid said quietly, trying to stretch her neck and finally huffing in resignation. "What does it say?"

"Ahem ¦ well, it says; _Think of me when swinging / This gift I give unto / She who Freyja favours. Cleave ye the mighty foe / Who will stand in your path / Towards the Great Beyond._"

"Whoaaaaw" Tuffnut said. Then he blinked. "So what does it REALLY say?"

Fishlegs rolled his eyes in exasperation. Ruffnut hadn't caught half of that either, but judging by the way Astrid was looking completely starstruck as she took the axe back, it was something good.

"Basically, he's asking Freya for protection, he thinks Astrid is very beautiful and he totally thinks she's such a kick-ass warrior she'll probably end up in Freya's hall."

"But it said 'think of me' at the start, didn't it?" Tuffnut said in confusion. Fishlegs bit his lip and looked at Astrid.

"Well, yes, but ¦ that's sort of a message to Astrid ¦ isn't it?"

Ruffnut held in a cackle when Astrid started, looking between them and the axe with a rather ¦ interesting expression. Yeah ¦ Hiccup may well get laid tonight.

"Oh yeah, my man Hiccup's getting some!" Tuffnut voiced unwisely. Ung, she needed to stop being his twin, somehow.

Astrid's axe, predictably, landed an inch from his nose. Flat-Fart gave a whine and moved away from the weapon, but Astrid was smiling sweetly and it confused both the dragons and her brother. Not that there was much mental difference.

"If you don't stop making lewd insinuations you probably don't even understand," she said in a really nice voice, "you're going to find yourself unable to pee standing up."

Tuff went white, not needing any explanation for that one. Still smiling brightly, Astrid hauled her axe into place and stood.

"I should probably head back," she said, already moving towards the door. "Good night; I'll see you tomorrow!"

Ruffnut turned to Fishlegs the moment the door was closed and Astrid's running footsteps faded up the path; she could feel Tuffnut do the same.

"There's an 83% chance of Tuff being right," he said, lighting his pipe 2 again. Tuff whooped, but Ruffnut kept looking at her husband, who finally whispered to her, "and 42% chance of it going well. But

â€| 58% of it not."

Ruffnut winced. Ouch. Maybe tomorrow's washday wasn't going to be as awesome after all.

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Cultural Notes:

1 A DrÃ³ttkvÃ¶tt is a poem that is wickedly complicated to write, and was a technique taught only to leading families (at least, according to the internet). Hiccup is not my favourite muse right now, for forcing to write that. It is not perfect, as the meter on its own is enough to kill a person without taking the necessary alliterations into account. I am no poet, and did my best - please be gentle with me.

2 Pipes were found in Canadian Viking settlements so some of them were at least enured to the art of smoking tobacco. And while they didn't only smoke tobacco, if they can have potatoes in Berk in the film and the series, then they certainly can have tobacco brought back from sea and now dragon voyages.

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**Hiccup is a corny little sneakâ€| and so am I. Clues abound! But of course, next chapter is going to be all about a certain someone doing stupid, stupid thingsâ€|

>

6. Breaking

Of course, things start looking up, and then â€|

****A slight warning: Some discussion of sexual activities between adults.****

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><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

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><p>Chapter 4 - Breaking_

**Indeed- why should I not admit it? - at that moment, my heart was breaking.**

â€• _**Kazuo Ishiguro**_

For the second time that week, Astrid practically raced home. She was feeling awfully stupid; she hadn't behaved like this since she was a child, and had received that first axe which had made her so happy. For a few weeks, she had been so sure the lightness in her chest would be enough to allow her to fly if she ran fast enough. This was almost a similar feeling, though it seemed magnified - and it was almost completely due to Hiccup.

The axe had already been a beautiful, beautiful surprise. Whoever she showed it off to give her an envious glance, then a knowing one, and she couldn't help but crave both looks and their covert meaning. When she'd found the rune blessings' existence, she'd spent hours, unable to sleep, looking at them in her room in the candlelight, and peeking out through the reed wall down at his curtain. Now this...

Upon arriving at the hall, she realised immediately that Stoick wasn't there - the helmet wasn't on the hook, and the bear cloak wasn't next to it. He may not be back from the farm inspection yet - or else the racket coming from the bathing room had driven him right back out.

Astrid's elation faded slightly as she closed the door quietly and tiptoed towards the bathing room's open door. She spotted Hiccup right away in the small room, kneeling on his good knee as he hammered away at a cylindrical container he was affixing to the tub. Astrid waited for him to stop hammering to wipe his brow before she spoke up.

"So what's that for?" she asked, and it was so very gratifying when he yelped and fell backwards onto his (shapely) butt, then huffed and gave her a look of mild annoyance through his lashes.

Damn him, that looked good on him too.

"Are you going to answer my question, dragon boy?" she said, walking in and resting against the tub wall. Up close, it looked like a container for scrolls. "Planning to read while we're in the bath?"

The colour that rose to his face was almost more gratifying than how his eyes ran down from her face to her boots. She did her best not to shiver, and just gave him a smirk and a hands-up, which he took with a smile.

"About that," he said, rubbing the back of his head while looking down sheepishly, in much the same way Stoick did sometimes. It looked so very strange on the large fighter the chief was, but it really fitted him. "Um, wellâ€¦" She tilted her head to try to see his face, and his eyes sneaked upwards to hers again - and he went redder. Freya, she could do this all day. She was really beginning to understand what the appeal of this whole 'flirting' thing was. The power rush was incredible.

"Are you telling me what this is for, then?" she asked again, giving the cylinder a gentle knock.

"Oh, yeah, sure!" He fiddled with the top and it came away, revealing the wooden tube to be hollow and to have a woolen sock inside. "This is for the foot. That way, it can stay as dry as possible while I'm in here."

"That's a really good idea," she replied, sticking her hand inside the tube to feel soft, dry interior. "Won't the sock get wet, though?"

"Nah, the lid seals it off completely. I put some tree gum around the edge, see?" She took the lid from him, running her thumb over the

edges to find the smoothed tree gum. She put the lid in place and pushed, and it slid in with some resistance, then stuck.

"This really is a good ideaâ€| it could be used on ships too. To stop things from getting damp that really shouldn't, like the maps or the food."

"That's â€| I hadn't thought of that!" he said, grinning, and she grinned back, stepping closer to him.

"See, I told you that you'd get your drive back," she said, sticking her pinky into his belly. He was only wearing his tunic, the laces at the top undone too, so her fingers met only wool and hard muscle. He danced away from her and rubbed his belly, pouting, and she had to stop herself from snorting at him. His eyes flickered across the room, and hers followed, only to find that the tube wasn't the only modification he had made. There were rails along the stairs, another on one side of the tub, and one rod rail against the wall, set very low and and diagonally. "What's all that?"

"Well, funny you should mention my drive and all," he said, his grin returning. He took her hand abruptly and she was startled enough at his uncharacteristic forwardness to let him pull her to the foot of the stairs beside him. "I've been thinking about what you told me a lot, Astrid. About how I should just get back into the game but â€| not push it?" She nodded at him, almost absently. The glance he was giving her was a lovely one; he looked confident in that moment, and his eyes were dancing with that light that used to precede disasters, but that now meant another stroke of genius was about to hit Berk. Or her, in this case. "Well, I thought this was the safest environment to try. With all these, I can bathe on my own starting tomorrow!"

"What?" she asked, suddenly feeling horrified, and all those lovely feelings she'd just been stoking in her chest tumbling into a cold bucket of water.

"Don't worry about it," he said, holding his free hand up. "I won't be getting my bad leg wet. I tested it out, and everything works. Look, I'll show youâ€|"

Astrid stared, rather dumbfounded as he sat down on a new stool by the tube she'd missed and unlaced his leg. With a bit of effort (and his forearm muscle flexing for the effort, she hated to notice) he pulled the lid off the tube and let his metal foot drop into it, replacing the lid. He reached for his tunic, then stopped himself when he saw her eyes following the movement.

"Anyway," he said, clearing his voice, "Now I grab here -" he reached behind him where the rail for the steps was and hauled himself standing with surprising steadiness. Between hopping and maneuvering himself up the rail, he managed the two steps (arguably three, with the log on the in-step) by using the rail on either side of him like crutches, then turned to sit on the rim, reach behind him again and haul himself on the stool inside the bath. Still holding onto the railing against the closest bath wall for balance, he swung the good leg over, and then looked at her triumphantly.

"Tara!" he said with a flourish, his cheeks flushed from the exertion and his breath slightly short. Astrid merely blinked at him, and he

faltered slightly. "Er â€| I know I probably looked rather stupid but - I didn't fall once!"

"And what about when things are all wet?" she asked before she could stop himself. He gave her a smirk that was rather cheeky, and her cheeks twitched, despite the sinking feelings in her chest.

"I've thought of that. Dad will have wet a number of linens to dry himself already and I can spread those on the floor. Hopefully they won't get too dirty. For you, I mean. But I can lend a hand to wash them later." He was looking at her hopefully through his lashes again, a half smile still pulling one side of his lips upwards.

"Look, I know this is ambitious, and you're worried." He stood up again, and hopped down in the same way he'd gone up, resting on the rail to face her. Astrid's hands automatically came up to steady him, and for a single moment she froze, suddenly feeling that the action had been unwelcome. That the progress she'd thought they were making wasn't really happening at all. Her eyes flicked to the tub, where she'd hoped to talk â€| tomorrow, she had hoped, after he'd given her such a beautiful thing like comfort when she was upset, and that axe, covered in all those lovely words that carried so much promise of â€|

"Astrid," he whispered. She looked at him. "I really need to do this. For myself. I'll â€|" he seemed to falter, then he swallowed hard.

"I'll leave the door ajar, and if I need, I'll call you. I swear I will. I'm still not completely there yet, I know I'm not, but I need to feel that I'm on the road, at least." One of his hands cupped her cheek. "You've been helping me so much, Astrid. I â€|"

And then he was kissing her, and something passed over her skin, like she'd touched a lightning eel, all the way down to her toes. It was brief, only a touch of his lips on hers in the same way that she had kissed him a few days ago. But it was enough for her to memorise his scent when he was that close, to feel his breath on her cheek, to notice that he had so many more freckles now, and that his lips felt different when he kissed her.

He moved away, and she opened her eyes (when had she closed them?) to find a shamefaced look.

"Sorry, I shouldn't haveâ€|" She had no idea what to say; no words at all where coming to her head in the jumbled mess of emotions her chest was left with. But she didn't want him to think that he had been unwelcome - she wanted him to do that again. So she stepped forwards, slid her arms around him and rested her head against his chest. His heart was beating rapidly against her ear, which gave a bit of solace as her own was trying to beat its way out of his chest. One arm still rested on the railing, but the other curled around her shoulders. Taking courage, Astrid steadied him with one arm and reached out with the other to remove his grip on the rail altogether.

He gave a slight yelp of protest as he found himself suddenly unsteady, his prosthetic leg still in its tube. Astrid just looked up at him wordlessly and he stopped, letting her guide his arm to her shoulder as well.

"You know I don't mind, right?" she said quietly

"You mean 'erâ€| what do you mean?" he asked, looking flustered. She couldn't help smiling slightly.

"I don't mind helping you. It's really 'erâ€| the least she could do? No, that didn't sound right. What she wanted to do? No, that felt like complete exposure of everything that was roiling in her chest like a maelstrom.

"And, um," he went on before she could decide, running the pad of a finger over her lips. The contact once again made all her skin come alive. "You- you minded that?"

She still didn't really know what to say, but the worried look in his eyes simply tugged at her. Very carefully, since she was the one holding both of them up, she rose to her tiptoes. He met her halfway, and this time their lips lingered, sending tingling sensations from her lips to the rest of her. One of his hands found its way to the back of her head, and she had to consciously remind herself that she was holding them up, that she couldn't lean into him, and that she certainly couldn't let her knees go weak as they were definitely threatening to do.

His lips were moving over hers so gently, and she realised that she was being kissed - really kissed - for the first time. His arm remained on her shoulders, his hand in her hair, but just his fingers massaging her skin gently was making her feel the temperature in the room rise as if the bath was full and steam was misting everywhere.

Her chest gave a twinge. She wouldn't be here with him tomorrow. She wasn't even sure why it hurt her so much that she wouldn't be, but she did press him closer to her, trying to compensate for that closeness she always felt with him on washdays. Some of the things her mother and Ruff told her about men began to flit through her mind unbidden, and her hand fisted into the back of his tunic as the temperature in the room got hotter. He shifted against her slightly, the arm holding himself up around her shoulders became an iron band, and she almost gasped when the hand on her head brushed her ear shell.

"Odin's beard! This blasted rain!"

A gust of cold wind swept through the house, and in clear view of the bathing room, Stoick walked in, brushing water droplets off himself. Colour of a different kind bloomed on her cheeks and they both scrambled away from each other.

Only, both of them had suddenly forgotten that his leg was still out on the count. With a yelp, Hiccup fell over, arse-over-teakettle, and ended up with his one good foot up in the air and his bad leg resting against the railing, while Astrid first stepped back, then ended up scrambling as she tried and failed to hold him up. The feeling in her chest roiled with something hilarious and happy before it was jumbled in embarrassment again.

"Holy Frigga, are you both alright?" Stoick was at the door, completely blocking the entrance, and looking at them with a perplexed and worried expression. Astrid looked down at Hiccup, lying flat on his back with his legs up in the air against the rail and blinking at her, and judging by how hot her face felt, she must look

as red as he was.

Before she knew it, she was laughing as she knelt to help Hiccup up, sitting him down on a stair and retrieving his foot.

"Hiccup was â€œ showing me how things work," she said with a cheeky grin she spared him as she threw his foot at him. He grinned back at her, still terribly red in the face in a way that gave them away completely, and she walked around Stoick to get to the fire-pit and put the pot of soup over it to warm.

She smiled at Toothless, who came up to but his head against her shoulder. He gave her a look that was a little too knowing, and the embarrassment and confusion returned full-force.

"You saw all that?" she whispered, trying for affronted but ending up sounding horrified. The cunning look in his eyes increased as they went half lidded and his vocalisation turned into a hum, his snout nudging her slightly in the shoulder. She bit her lip, turning to look at Hiccup explaining the bath improvements to Stoick.

Hiccup had first cut off one of the only moments in the whole week where they were together, alone, for a consistent amount of time in what looked like a permanent fashion, and then he had kissed her - really kissed her - right after. A part of her understood that he needed it - his grin had been bright as he told her, his eyes shining with that usual vacant look of inner thoughts passing too quickly to explain to someone else. For some reason, she couldn't feel glad for him, but she couldn't deny him his wish, either. And she â€œ couldn't voice her disappointment; it made no sense.

She didn't have a real reason to be sad. He had kissed her in a way she â€œ she could only hope. Astrid felt selfish even to nurture the thoughts of how much she wanted him to take the rest of it back. Obviously, it wasn't that he didn't enjoy her company, or that he didn't look forward to having a long, uninterrupted stretch of time where it was only him and her, finding each other after so long, reconnecting and learning the new and familiar person the other had become. Possibly he still wanted that. Maybe he'd make time in their week elsewhere, as she had been doing - dropping off his lunch, passing by the forge, going to the council meetings with him even though it was not strictly required of her anymore - and those moments between them in the tub could be found elsewhere.

Maybe he'd be less tense, too; he seemed always so â€œ put out, to be undressed around her. And his reaction to her undressed â€œ she had best not think about that. She'd hated to admit it, even to herself, but that reaction had given her doubts about herself she had never had before and which she was not altogether comfortable admitting existed. She was still a Viking first, a woman second sometimes, and so she put them away. Astrid looked back, finding Hiccup giving his father a demonstration of the new additions in the same way he'd given her and then she got up and went to the cooking section of the hall.

Toothless followed her and nudged her when she stopped to stare aimlessly at the bowls in her hand, but she couldn't shake the thoughts off. Washday had always been special to her; her mother's stories had filled her head as a child, and even with his tense attitude, they had been moments of quiet intimacy for her, where to

get to know her future husband. Become acquainted with his body, but also his mind, the same old thoughts and ways of kindness he'd had before, but also the new things, the character traits he had acquired over the past five years of travel and adventures. A new hardness here and there, aided by his natural stubbornness; a greater patience and less of an impulse to rush headlong into his ideas without testing them properly first. The edge of experience, irreplaceable except with itself, that made his hands move faster and his mind think clearer. The set of his chin and his jawline as he gnawed on a wooden pencil-end; his lips when he pouted; hair, dry or wet or full of soap; his eyes when he looked at her shyly.

She swallowed a lump, scratching Toothless who bumped her again, and sneaking him a fish Hiccup would no doubt grumble at her for. And his dragon had seen her being kissed for the first time and was giving her a look worthy of Ruffnut for it. Brilliant.

But despite what she told herself, despite how her lips still tingled and she tried to re-immerse herself in the memory of him kissing her so sweetly, rather than in the fact that he'd cut off one of their only solitary, intimate moments in their schedules, she couldn't manage it. The elation from the kiss was undercut by the thought of tomorrow, and no matter how she looked at it, she couldn't help but feel shortchanged.

When he came out of the bathing room, still talking with his dad and waving his arms around in that manner singular to him as he animatedly told him of further improvements he meant to make to his foot and flying gear, she also knew with certainty that she wouldn't tell him any of this. He looked too happy right now, sneaking glances her way with a grin on his face, his happiness seemingly undamaged by the loss of their quiet alone-time. And he was so glad, to regain another section of his independence and autonomy. He was already walking straighter, head held higher. She couldn't take that away from him, because if she said anything to him now, she knew he was kind enough to put his wishes aside, and let her help him at the cost of his own feelings of self-worth. That she couldn't do.

And she â€“ she couldn't admit it to him, too. It was hard enough to admit to herself, that a softer, delicate part of her existed somewhere in her chest, and that it had begun to depend on his closeness and his attention. She hated that she found herself hoping his eyes would turn her way when they were in the same room, or that she stopped to listen every time he laughed. She hated that this new part of her grew larger and larger when he was close; smiling and smelling of wild chicory.

Most of all, she hated how vulnerable it was. How right now, with just a few words, it was left bruised and rubbed raw, small spots of blood blooming along the surface. This new place inside her, born who knows how long ago, had been growing so much bigger, especially since he had come back with all his sweet kindness. And she wasn't sure she was ready to tell him he had this much power over her - that she was this weak, and he had this much obligation towards her as a result.

She brought the bowls to the fire-pit, stirring the soup so it heated evenly then ladling it and handing them out. When she gave Hiccup his own bowl he looked at her bashfully, quickly averting his eyes to his father in a way he used to do very often when he was younger. The

confusion in her chest increased as his attention became completely taken by what his father was saying as he sipped his food. He didn't look at her again.

So she sat on the opposite end of the fire pit, Toothless coming to sit beside her, instead of his rider, as if to keep her company as she drowned within her own chest. She looked at him all night across the muted flames, but he rarely looked at her. The axe on her back felt like a dead weight, and she suddenly remembered 'the most beautiful woman in Midgard', who she had stupidly forgotten in the slight glow of the recent days. By the time her soup bowl was empty, the only thing left in her chest was a dull sort of sadness.

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Stains were aggressively attacked, soap first being rubbed into the linen and then two river stones of the right size being applied vigorously, one on each side of the fabric as they are rubbed hard enough to lather and then take any stain out of the cloth.

It was a ritual she had performed for her entire life. Every week, washday came around, and every week it was the same. Since she could walk, she had been dragged to the riverside to watch as the task was carried out, or carry out the task herself. And then (finally!) she had been the one doing the dragging, taking her sweet, smart-eyed girl-child with her to the river bank, starting her own tradition. It had always been such a solitary task for her since her mother and Hacknee's had passed on, and since she had never invited her daughters-in- law into the circle of her riverbank spot, it hadn't stopped being a very tiring and lonesome chore until her sweet Astrid had joined in.

It was a ritual in womanhood, as well. Everyone on Berk was a warrior to a certain extent. They were Vikings, it was impossible not to be. Women though also had the domestic chores on top of everything else, and it was sometimes just as tiring as taking on a pack of gronkles. But the circle of women, sometimes family, sometimes close-to, who always banded together with an excuse of helping each other sort through their dirty clothes made it more than worth it. Each circle had its spot beside the river, its customs and rituals and in-jokes. And most importantly, each circle was tight knit, so that everyone had a least one person to confide in, to ask advice of, and receive comfort, support, or even an invite to the hall later for a good round of ale tankards. Laundry was shared (and covered for, when illness or motherhood sapped a member of the circle of time and energy) as well as other chores, but the comfort of company and trustworthy battle-sisters to share everything from gossip to grieving to sword sharpening techniques and tad-bits about lovemaking with was what had kept these little 'secret' systems running.

Brunhilda attacked her laundry with much more gusto this morning. Their patch of Winter sun along the freezing river water - helpfully made tolerable by Astrid's darling nadder shooting fire into it a little upstream - was peaceful and unusually quiet.

Well, Astrid was quiet. Ruffnut was relating a rather interesting story, actually.

"And then he whined," the girl cackled evilly, stopping in her splashy rinsing of a nightgown to grab a sleeve and give it a rather graphic tug. "All I had to do was tilt it a bit upwards and tug slower and he was flopping like a shark on a deck."

"You don't say," Bruhilda said, interested despite herself. She'd have to try that on the old husband. With all the little children and married couples they had in the hall, there was little chance to be alone long enough for the full deal. But a nice warm-up session never hurt anyone. The wife in her was enthusiastic - she hadn't surprised her dear man with something a little spicey like this in a while, and he had been too busy recently hauling in as much fish as their boats could carry with their sons to even be home long enough, let alone think up some nice solitary interlude between them. And now, they had a son less to help, so the trip would be more arduous. The mother in her, on the other hand, glanced at Astrid worriedly as her little girl attacked a stain on one of Stoick's inner tunics more aggressively.

Brunhilda had come to pick up her daughter that morning just on time to see Astrid sitting against Toothless by the firepit peeling onions, looking worriedly at the door of the bathing room. Just as Brunhilda slipped her head in, as she usually did, Hiccup opened the bathing room door and came out, looking clean and fresh, while Astrid's hair was already drying against the fire's heat. It had seemed odd and incongruous, as it had seemed to suggest that Astrid had not been in the room with him when she knew the girl washed last. When Astrid had explained on the way to Ruff's, her mother's heart had gone out to her.

The boy meant well, but he was an idiot. He apparently couldn't see that in order to validate his own independence and to try to find his way back to his feet again, he was undermining Astrid's role in the household and in the village significantly, if word of this got out. And while Astrid didn't only need her role of future wife and caregiver in order to have a voice on Berk - she was still a warrior, as they all were and would grab an axe at the drop of a hat; she was still a very good carver, helping out wherever was needed in the finer arts of wooden implements; she still took patrols and defence positions when the rotation required it. But Astrid was also a woman and a future wife, and as the only female member of Stoick's household, it was normal for her to carry out those chores which were required. That her future husband was denying her one of them left her in a false position and â€¡

"Awright, out with it. Which yak got your tongue?" Ruff said finally. Apparently, Brunhilda had been lost in thought long enough for Ruffnut to become annoyed at the pretense of tiptoeing around a morose Astrid and pretending not to notice. "I swear, if you jumped him and he said no, I'll cull his balls for you."

"What?" Astrid asked, startled. Ruff frowned at her.

"What, you think we didn't notice you had â€¡ other intentions, yesterday?" Ruff replied in a flat voice, and Brunhilda looked at her daughters with interest. Astrid hadn't told her this. "After Fishlegs found that rune poetry crap in your axe, you looked about ready to go find him and have him against a wall."

"Ruffnut!" Astrid choked out.

"What runes?" Brunhilda asked. Ruffnut grinned wolfishly at her.

"Apparently, lover boy is too much of a wuss to tell her things to her face, so he hid a lot of romantic crap on her axe that you can only see if you hold it to the light juuuust right. Let me show you."

Before Astrid could prevent it, Ruff reached over and plucked the axe right out of her back holster; then the taller girl stopped short.

"Wha â€| this is your old axe - I mean, your old old axe, the one Gobber made for you so you wouldn't ruin Hiccup's while he was away!" Ruffnut exchanged a dismayed look with Brunhilda. "Whoa, how bad did it go?"

Astrid didn't answer, and simply beat at the linen more vigorously.

"Did he tell you he's into men, or something?" She was instantly punched in the face. "OW! Well, it can't be that bad, then."

"It really isn't too bad, deary," Brunhilda said with a shrug. "Once he gets over this burst of independence, he'll change his mind."

"What? What, what?" Ruffnut looked mightily annoyed. Woodnut, strapped to her back, gave a whine and her mother glared back at her. "Mother's talking, little gas monster. Give it a minute."

"He's found a way to bathe on his own," Brunhilda clarified since Astrid didn't look inclined to speak at all. "And seeing as he seems to have managed well enough this morning, there will probably not be another shared bath until they're good and married."

"Huh," Ruffnut said. "I can see how that can be annoying, just as soon as she decided to jump his bones."

"Ruffnut, I swear, I'm in no mood for it," Astrid said through gritted teeth. Brunhilda winced; Stoick had better have a spare tunic, because that one was sure to have a hole by now.

"You were last night, or I'm not married," Ruff replied uncaring of Astrid's implied threat. "But oi, what excuse did he give for being so shy?"

"...What?" Brunhilda asked.

"Shy," Ruffnut said again as if they were both stupid. "Like my Fishlegs."

Brunhilda could almost hear her own mother in her ears; 'you are smart, Hilda my girl, but you certainly also are stupid.'

"Oh, that's so obvious," Brunhilda groaned, slapping her girl's shoulder. "Go on, tell us all of it, then."

"But â€|"

"Astrid."

She pouted, but let up on the tunic (which was still miraculously intact, though probably considerably thinner in that spot), dunking it into the river to rinse. "I said most of it. He just straight up told me he needed to feel like he was doing something with himself again, and hopped around sho-"

"Details," Ruffnut interrupted in a sing-song voice. Brunhilda smirked, because Astrid didn't tackle the other girl only because of the baby strapped to her back, and Ruff knew it well; the anger was spurring Astrid on like a charm.

"Fine! So I walk in, surprise him, he falls over on his arse." Ruffnut's grin widened. "And yes, yes; I looked, and it's great, ok?" Astrid seemed suddenly distracted by more than anger. "It's even greater unclothed."

"I knew you had it in you," Ruffnut taunted, deftly avoiding a swipe to the head. "Then you helped him 'get up'?"

"Why do you have to make everything sound â€| dirty?" Astrid huffed. Brunhilda was too entertained to interrupt. Astrid began wringing the massive tunic and went on. "He started showing me the stuff he'd added. The container for his leg, the place where he'd sit down to undress-"

"Did that part enter the demonstration, too?"

This time Astrid blushed slightly, and even smiled a little. Brunhilda smirked at Ruff behind her back.

"Almost. He got carried away and reached for his tunic, and then he went all red and almost started stuttering again."

"See, I told you," Ruffnut snorted. "Those baths with you must have been torture for him."

"What do you mean?" Astrid's tone was clearly dismayed.

"Look, I never told anyone this, because Fishlegs totally begged me not to â€| but our wedding night was a disaster. With the parents outside our room listening, and there I was, getting all hot and bothered." A dreamy expression came over her face, one usually reserved for raptures of destruction. Well perhaps this was the case too. "First time I stuck my hand down his trousers, he jumped so hard he ended up holding onto one of the rafters, and then he wouldn't come down and I had to beat him down with a broom."

"What?" Astrid said, and she was laughing at the image despite herself. Brunhilda, for all her age, wasn't able to hold in the chuckles either.

"Oh yes, I had to corner him at the end of the bed and have my way with him. I thought it was because it was arranged, and he didn't like me at all, but when he saw me getting upset he just tried to tell me he didn't know what he was doing, and from the way he was going red as a nightmare and swallowing his own words, I finally gathered that he was just all-around shy. And we both know

Fishlegs wasn't the only guy our age who went red and bit his tongue around girls."

Brunhilda nodded through her laughs. "You know dear, I think she makes a fair point."

"True but â€| I'm sure Hiccup's not â€| you know â€| _inexperienced_. He's been away for five years."

"Aye that's true, but that doesn't seem to have taken his shyness from him." Brunhilda nudged her. "Well, go on? Tell us the rest of it, girl."

"Oh, well, I, um â€| protested a bit. And then he â€|" Astrid's face twisted into something worried and confused, and Brunhilda's fear for her little girl spiked. What had he said to make her look that hurt?

"He what? I didn't hear it with gas-brain fussing here," Ruff said indelicately, bringing the baby sling to the front to give her a teat.

"Heâ€| he kissed me."

"Eh?!"

Brunhilda gave her daughter a twack on the head. "You didn't tell me that!"

"Like, peck on the cheek, kissed you, or full on tongue-down-your-throat type of kiss?" Ruffnut asked with â€| did that girl wiggle her brows like Gobber sometimes did? She'd have to make sure to tell the man it was catching on.

"Neither," a very red and almost sheepish Astrid replied. Brunhilda nearly blinked at her; who knew, her daughter - one of the foremost fighters of her generation - reduced to girlish behaviours by a slip of a man. The poor darling really was lost. "He just, held me close and kissed me â€| for a good bit."

"How long's a 'good bit'?" Brunhilda asked, looking at her daughter knowingly.

"I, um â€| don't really know?" Astrid gave her a tentative smile, and Brunhilda burst out laughing.

"He's good, always knew he'd be," Brunhilda said between guffaws. Astrid shrugged in attempted casualness, but her twitching lips and lightly coloured cheeks said otherwise.

"Still, it, he â€| it makes no sense," she finally said with a resigned sigh. "It's like we're not even engaged one moment - he treats me like he treats Fishlegs or you! And then he's kissing me until I don't know what my name is -" Brunhilda and Ruffnut shared a glance over her daughter's head. "-- and not talking to me for the rest of the night!"

"Oh?"

"Yes! Spoke to Stoick all night, and-"

"-Would barely look at you?" Ruffnut guessed. Astrid blinked, then nodded.

"I rest my case," the young mother replied with a flourish. "Totally my Fishlegs. He was leaving me flowers all over the house - _flowers_. For _me_. And it turned out later they had a meaning too, but what would _I_ know? Anyway, kept leaving me these stupid flowers and things, and me getting all angry because he couldn't keep his damn botany samples to himself and he was not _talking to me_. He'd sort of squeak and run away if I got into the same part of the hall or _village_ he was in. Cornered him and made him talk, and it turns out he just didn't know what to say, so he was trying to say it with the flowers.2 With you, it's the axe and the funky runes."

"Yes, but, Hiccup-"

"Hiccup nothing, dear, I think she's right." Brunhilda put her washing aside for a moment to throw an arm around her daughter. "Hiccup's never been the sort of man like â€œ Snotlout, or your father or Gobber." Astrid gave her an incredulous look. "Oh, he's had his conquests, that old fighter. But Hiccup, now, he's not that sort of man to brag, or to make you sit on his knee in the hall for all to see while he gets drunk and kisses your cheek and sings ale songs to you. He's more likely to offer to help you do your chores to keep you happy, or just spend time with you around the house. And I think you much prefer it that way." Astrid nodded. "So you'll have to take the good with the bad. And I have to admit that Ruffnut's right. He's kept his shyness about him, and I'll not be surprised if he's not as well acquainted with women from his travels as you suggest."

Now both young girls looked at her incredulously.

"We will see, dear, but for now listen to us, and think about it. Hiccup isn't really the type to play with a girl's heart that I know. And â€œ there's also one other thing you have to remember. The engagement is chafing for you, isn't it?" Astrid's cheeks went red and she looked down at her lap, but she nodded. "You're getting impatient, I know. It's an unusual situation and it's been five years, darling, I understand. But, you need to remember one thing." She swept her daughter's hair out of her eyes. "It's only been weeks for him. He woke up after a battle to find himself with no foot and engaged to a woman who was tending to his every need, when he's been mostly alone for a long time, from what he's let slip so far. Must take a while to adjust for anyone, and Hiccup's the thinking kind. It may take him longer."

Astrid leaned into her, and Ruffnut gave her knee a pat as the baby prevented anything further. She was sorry for her little girl; she'd never had this problem herself, with her husband's hands often needing to be fended off, rather than egged on. Not that she'd minded after a while, of course, but Hiccup seemed to have taken the stand-offish approach to their engagement, possibly trying to see what he was getting into. While it denoted intelligence, and possibly respect for her little girl, and maybe Ruff's theory was also right, it also worried her. Brunhilda had always known that the boy was in love with her daughter - the blind could see it as clear as the grey sea. But a lot changed in five years, and her daughter's heart had evidently been won. His, on the other hand â€œ

She needed to have a talk with him. As his future mother-in-law - scratch that, as his future mother-figure, he was going to tell her what was going on in that head of his. She was fond of him as one could be of an adored child not ones' own, but no one hurt her little girl.

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1 Yes, Hiccup invented Tupperware. If Dreamworks can give him a squirrel suit, I can give him air-tight containers. ;)

2 I'm taking some liberties here, as I don't know if Vikings had a language of flowers. Even if they didn't giving girls flowers seems to be a universal token of affection. Of course, Ruff never thought they were for her - why would anyone give her weeds? - and just thought they were botany samples. After all, taking note of flora and fauna falls under 'typical guy things' for Fishlegs.

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**To my sharper readers: I'm sure you've noticed that some of the earlier epithets are returning to bit people in the arse, or are only now beginning to make sense. This is not because I put in the wrong heading to the chapters, but because those are there to do a little bit of foreshadowing. Or to mislead you, of course. I have to keep everyone on their toes. Evil overlord and all.

>

Hiccup is a complete idiot â€“ but he's also a poor dear, because he's trying really hard not force Astrid into anything he fears she does not want, and sometimes this stops him from seeing things. Again, selective blindness and irony will be heavily used writing tools

I would also like to formally introduce you all to what Foxy-girl has dubbed 'the laundry brigade'. This nucleus of three women is, actually, a rather typical thing to happen not only in Viking times. Women still form support groups amongst themselves in this manner in some villages of my country, and while it's not usually laundry they're doing (bingo is a favourite one), there are certain rituals that have been kept. This 'laudry brigade' is Astrid's support system, and it will be very important to her as it recurs through the story.

Also; Berk. The people of the village will play a part in this as much as anything.

7. Always

**Anger, disappointment, misunderstandings, broken hearts are on the menu for today. Let the games begin.

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* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 5 - Always_

_**Visits always give pleasure-if not the arrival, the
departure**_

â€• _**Proverb**_

Hiccup hammered away at the yak shods, stopping only to re-adjust his grip with the thongs or to take a look and make sure the angle was right. It was hard, heavy work, and it wasn't any of his favorite. Yaks needed strong steel on their hoofs or they would twist it and break it quickly, between their weight and the rocks they tended to try to climb. And now, during the sleepy Winter months, was the right time to do metal work before the Harvest re-shodding. He'd also been working on the carts and the winch-joints that the carpenters had requested, which were heavy and finicky work in turn, but at least, they kept his mind occupied.

Toothless was giving him the cold shoulder too, for some reason, and it served to put his mood in the dumps completely. The dragon was faithfully curled up beside him, but he answered any of his questions with huffs and grumbles, and after a while he'd just given up.

Gobber seemed cheerful at least, and that carried the day aloft. Hiccup had enjoyed taking his place once again beside him in the smithy - this time as more of an equal than an apprentice. It suited him well; his time had become really difficult to divide in proper portions these days, between his duties teaching all the new riders what to do, teaching them and the children together important facts about various dragon species that he had observed in order to stay safe, and attending the council meetings. Not to mention, since he was the most experienced dragon rider, and dragons really simplified such a great many problems with heavy lifting, he often flew out there to help too. The day after washday was business as usual, and it simply slowed down slightly on the council meetings - but that just meant he didn't get to nibble at things put in front of him during the talks.

Like, right now, he was really hungry because he hadn't had the time to go catch a bite to eat. Not even a kip in the Great Hall - he knew he'd get stuck there if he even peeked his nose inside - and no one had dropped by to give him any lunch.

He realised he'd stopped hammering some time ago to stretch his neck out the window. After a moment of obviously-nothing-happening, he felt pathetic and sighed, turning back to his imported anvil, which had stayed exactly where it had been placed when he'd returned to Berk under a different name. His shoulders sagged, and he tried not to admit to himself how disappointed he was that it was almost sunset, and he hadn't seen hide nor hair of a certain blonde Viking.

"Awright, lad. What is it?"

Hiccup almost hammered his thumb into the yak shod. He turned to find Gobber looking at him expectantly

"Nothing," he said in a mumble, turning back to his anvil and feeling glad that he'd positioned it so his back was to the other smith. He knew Gobber wasn't going to let this go, but at least he could continue to look away under the pretense of working.

"You've been sighin' yer lungs out like a love-sick gronkle," he went on, predictably ignoring Hiccup's statement. "Even that dragon of yours pined less when you were recovering with that leg." Toothless flared his good tailfin up over his face, in a clear 'leave me out of this' sign. Hiccup snorted at him, and got whacked in the shin with a wing-tip for his troubles.

"It's nothing, Gobber," he said again, but when he saw movement close by the window he couldn't help but glance out quickly. It was just Bucket, who waved at him. He waved back, but his shoulders sagged again.

"Astrid's not been by today," Gobber said with patently leading, false innocence. Hiccup decided not to answer that - not because his insides gave a twinge, but because it wasn't a question. "Right, lad. What'd you do to her?"

His hackles rose. "I didn't do anything!" he replied, unable to hide how upset he was anymore. "She kissed me, and I kissed her back, and she seemed fine with it. But while we ate later she sat as far away from me as she could, and yesterday she literally ran out the room the moment I was in it. And today â€|" He waved at the window. His stomach stopped giving hunger pains as it rolled uncomfortably, almost scared of the implications of what he'd just voiced. Was she finally realising that being engaged to him meant more than just â€| being buddies and mothering him?

"Ah â€| well, you came to the right place for woman advice," Gobber said, leaning on a piller as Hiccup looked back at him with slight incredulity. "What? You think your old Gobber's not a ladies' man? Oh, my boy, some of the stories I could tell youâ€|"

"I'd rather you didn't," Hiccup said with a half smirk, still slightly unbelieving. Toothless beside him gave a moan of agreement.

"Make fun," Gobber said with a mock glare and a toothy smile. "But I'll tell you something about girls; just man up, and tell her what's going on in that brain of yours." Hiccup quirked a brow. "If she wants you, as I think that girl does, she'll just snap you up the moment the words are out of your mouth. If she doesn't, eh, at least you'll know." Gobber shrugged, as if the only thought didn't feel like Hiccup's world was tilting slightly sideways. "But I tell you, lad, it's not the kiss that's bothering her. There's another bee in tha' girl's bonny head."

"It can't be anything else," Hiccup said quietly, turning to give the elder smith his back again. Sunset lights began filtering through the windows, and he looked out at them accusingly. He still had a lot of work to do. "Literally nothing else happened since then because she's been â€| other places. All the time."

"Sure you didn't do or say something before?" Gobber asked. He nudged Hiccup and offered a rind of bread which the younger man took gratefully, and ate almost eagerly enough to be embarrassing. But he

swallowed and shook his head.

"We were talking, discussing things. Sharing â€|" he swallowed again, pretending that some bread had become caught in his throat. "Sharing ideas like we normally do. And now â€|"

"You have a 'normally', that's good. And how long has this been up?" Gobber asked, still in his relaxed manner.

"Freya's day."

That got his attention. "Freya's day? But that's two days ago!" Hiccup ducked his head back to the anvil and began working even harder. Gobber's reaction wasn't encouraging, and perhaps it was for the best that he had a lot to do. Going home right now, hungry or not, simply meant facing the impossibility of watching Astrid's back flee away from him again.

"You've done it good this time, then." Gobber nodded with insufferable hubris he certainly didn't deserve to have as a confirmed bachelor.

"Well, that's all good now, then, is it!" he replied, his voice angry as he took it out on the metal. "I just won't kiss her again, won't I. It's not like I have much chance to."

"Oi, lad, it's not what I meant â€|"

"I don't care what you meant, Gobber," he replied savagely. He was tired of people diminishing his emotions and trivialising them as jokes. Astrid wasn't just some girl to him, she was his woman of a lifetime, like his mother had been to his father. He had long ago admitted to himself that he was fiercely in love with her, and even five years apart and the knowledge that she was probably beyond his reach hadn't made him forget her, even though he'd tried and even prayed to the gods for relief. Now, she kept dancing around him like a frightened colt, undecided whether she wanted him or not, encouraging him one moment, and when he acted on it, bolting away. After the roller coaster of coming back and finding himself tied to her, she whom he considered his beloved already, having her play this game with him felt cruel, even if she perhaps needed it to decide for herself. His heart could only take so much; if she wanted the engagement dissolved, it would be better if she'd just told him.

"Ah ladâ€| you love her, don't ye?"

Hiccup's hammer landed on the anvil with such a clang that Toothless shot bolt upright.

"YES! I do! Are you happy now!" he yelled as he whirled on Gobber. "Is it funny? We can start making fun of the stupid boy who thought it was possible?! Three cheers for the gimp who didn't realise it was all a joke!"

Gobber just looked at him. Because it looked remarkably like pity, Hiccup turned away.

"You've got to tell her how you feel, lad."

"Sure," he replied in a shaking voice, unable to mask his feelings now that his anger was abated. "If kissing her makes her run for the hills, telling her I've loved her for years will definitely glue her to my side. They'll invent a new name for clinging once they see her with me!"

Gobber was quiet for a while, and Hiccup merely returned to work, emotions shaky and spent.

"Sorry," he finally said. "I shouldn't have yelled."

"'s alright, lad." A meaty hand landed on his shoulders. "I'll be headed in. You should, too."

"Are you going to the Hall?" he asked. Gobber gave a nod. "I think I'll stay here a while longer. Can you get one of the maids to bring me something?"

"You sure?" Gobber asked gently. "If it gets tardy, she still might visit."

Hiccup didn't bother to hide his pained look this time. He'd forgotten that he didn't have to hide anything from Gobber.

"I'll ask one of the girls."

"Thanks."

Hiccup drowned in his work for a few more hours, his mind going around in circles as he tried, and failed, to analyse the situation rationally. He tried to apply Gobber's logic, tried to see if he'd done something previously that had somehow offended her, but they had been so close, with her holding him and then kissing him. He could think of nothing else, and it simply seemed to be nothing else that was the problem. She'd rushed out the room as soon as his father had come home - embarrassment he'd thought at first - but her skittish behaviour since had strongly indicated that she'd regretted letting him kiss her.

His chest gave a pinch and a twist every time he thought that.

"Still hard at work, handsome?"

A desperate, pathetic part of him was so foolish that he looked up with blind hope, before his brain could register that this wasn't Astrid's voice. Ginna, one of the girls at the Hall, was holding a cloth bundle in her hands, obviously containing his food. He nodded his thanks and turned back to his work, eager to get this task done so he could at least sit to a warm meal, rather than a cold one.

"Getting food from the Hall?" Ginna went on as if he hadn't been silent. She smiled at him in a way that made him feel on edge, because it reminded him of some of the women he'd met in his travels. "What's that woman of yours doing, letting you go hungry."

Despite the havoc in his chest, his hackles bristled instantly. "She has been busy. She works as hard for Berk as any one of us, probably more."

Ginna shrugged. "I don't know," she replied carelessly, seemingly unaware that she'd kindled his anger and protective instincts. "But if I had a man like you, I'd certainly take better care of him."

"My betrothed takes as much care as any loving woman would," he replied, his mouth seemingly adding the second to last word just to torture his chest. Ginna looked peeved for a moment, and then her eyes sharpened.

"Does she, now? My my, wouldn't have put it among Astrid's many talents, to keep a man happy."

The implication was evident. And infuriating. He kept his calm by a hair's breadth, but instantly draw a sword from the stack and walked towards her. He felt some satisfaction in watching her back away, and simply proceeded to the sharpening wheel behind her when she'd almost stumbled her way away.

"I would appreciate if you would keep from making those insinuations," he said to her coldly, looking her in the eye instead of the spinning, sharpening wheel. "They damage Astrid's honour, and I will not have it."

Ginna huffed, obviously intimidated by his scare tactics if her eyes shifting constantly to the sword in his hand was any indication. Smoulder had not yet come out to play, and he doubted she would for a little trollop like this one. But he would break her out if it meant shutting Ginna up.

"Well then, here's your meal. What do you have for a bargain?" Hiccup glared at her and she stepped back. He knew she was lying, because Gobber would most certainly have bargained for his meal already; he knew the old smith well enough. Toothless seemed finally fed up with the standoff and began growling, looking at the barmaid beadily. Without hesitation, Hiccup opened a drawer and withdrew one of the tiny steel trinkets he sometimes made for the children and threw it at her.

"There. You are upsetting my dragon. Please leave."

She scoffed. "Not much of the famous kind man they say you are, aren't you?"

"I don't see anyone worth being kind to. My food has gone cold because of you."

She finally left, leaving a sour taste in his mouth as he watched her go. He'd seen so many women like her, out there; ruthless hunters, who stopped at nothing to obtain their means. While he was at the Eastern capital, before the bloodiest battle of his life, he'd had to fight one off with actual steel. He was used to dealing with them; at least Ginna didn't brandish a knife if she didn't get what she wanted. It just made him miss honest, beautiful Astrid more.

He took his wrapped pot by the glowing embers of the forge, stoking them slightly to get some warmth and light going. His food, thankfully, wasn't as cold as he'd feared, and he ate quickly, eager to get the night's job done so he could go to bed. The drawer he'd taken the trinket from was next to him, still open wide, and he

reached into it for something to do while he ate, sneaking Toothless morsels with his other hand.

A tiny straw doll, with leather clothing made out of scraps and pretty straw hair in two braids, tiny, thumb-sized helmed smithed on purpose and glued to her head with sap, caught his eyes right away and he winced. He'd forgotten that he'd made this for little Åttta, and he'd meant to give it to Astrid to pass it on.

He closed the drawer, thumbing the doll pensively. Perhaps it could be a conversation opener. He could give her the doll, gauge her reaction, try to see if she would loosen up slightly and talk to him again.

Or she could take it, look away and dart off with some excuse or other, as she'd been doing. The hand squeezing his gut gave a sadistic twist, and he put the doll down, giving the rest of his meal to his dragon, who looked at him worriedly.

No, he'd go himself. See how Åttta was doing with the supplies he'd brought. Astrid hadn't come to him feeling sad anymore (he ignored the part of him saying she hadn't come to him at all), so he was hopeful that the tiny one had recovered. If nothing else, he would give her the doll, and try to give Brunhilda back the silver he'd been given to repair Astrid's axe. As her promised, at least, he refused to take payment for what he could just give her. The gifts he gave her would never have a price.

"Come on, bud," he said, suddenly exhausted. The rest of his work would have to wait for tomorrow. He doused the fires and shut the forge, Toothless still nudging his hand and looking at him worriedly. "I'll be alright, my friend. It's just our stupid human mating rituals." And eye-roll indicated that he understood completely. "I'll be fine after a good sleep."

He wasn't sure of that, and judging by Toothless' unimpressed expression, neither was his dragon. But at least he had things to do, food to eat, and a home to return to. Things could be worse; they had been. Fingering the doll, he decided to think no more of it that night.

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Goethi sat quietly on a stool, sipping at the warmed up, watered mead that Brunhilda had given her. Her visit here had been two-fold - and she was happy that all had gone well on both fronts.

Little Åttta was snoozing happily, her wheezing finally abated, on the tiny cot that had been built for her while she convalesced. The child's illness had been caught early thanks to Astrid's prompt request for help, and she would be alright now, with some rest. Brunhilda had also accepted her offer. It gladdened the Goethi's mind to know that someone would follow in her steps. She knew that Brunhilda wouldn't be a Goethi long enough to lose her birth name as she had; Brunhilda had a family, and was much older than she had been, orphaned and widowed as she was, when the then Goethi Ingunn had taken her in and taught her the art. And hopefully, if Goethi counted her gods done right by, the art would then be passed down in the family, and would return to chief's clan as was right.

Brunhilda was just returning to her own stool beside hers when there was a soft knock on the door. They exchanged a puzzled look; nobody had been told that the quarantine had been lifted yet. She went to the there, and they were both surprised to see Hiccup, smiling hesitantly.

"Hello, Mother Hofferson," he said, sounding just as nervous as he looked. Goethi eyed him with a smirk and sat silently. She could imagine what - who - the boy had come for. In fact; "Is â€| er, Astrid, here?"

"No, dear," Brunhilda said with a smile, though Goethi noticed she was giving him a very thorough look. "I'm really sorry you took the trip for nothing."

"Oh, that's alright," he shrugged. "It's actually you I wanted. But she probably wouldn't approve either, and I wanted to know how fast I'd have to run." He gave her a cheeky grin which made the woman look at him suspiciously. "Well, you see, remember before we got the Red Death out of the way, your husband paid me to repair Astrid's axe? Well, seeing as I'm her promised, there is no way I'm charging her for that, and â€| "

"You'll have to take that up with my husband, dear," Brunhilda said with a laugh. "I'm not about to step on that man's betting agreements. He'd be in a dander for weeks! With me, and with you, mind!"

"Ah, I was afraid you'd say that." His grin hadn't faded, and Goethi sipped quietly as she watched with interest. Hiccup reached behind him, and quickly produced a full sack of flour, a bag of what sounded like steel nails, and a cage with a disgruntled chicken in it. "You can't refuse gifts from someone who's practically family now, can you?"

Ah, the cheeky devil. Brunhilda looked flustered, and could think of nothing to reply, obviously, so she just shook her head and slapped him fondly.

"I'll go put these in the shed. Now don't you go anywhere. Drop in, will you? I'd like to spend some time with you - you're like a ghost these days, always busy and never still. Sit down and wait for me; I'll give you something good to eat to put some meat on those bones."

Hiccup entered the room sheepishly as Brunhilda left, and Goethi sat still and quiet on her stool, shrinking into the background as she had learned to do when she wanted to observe. Her physiology was on her side as her small body took up little space and she was sitting in a corner, in the shadow of an urn.

Hiccup would have spotted her quickly however, close to the fire as she was, had a distraction not presented itself right away.

"Nana?" asked a sleep-slurred voice. Ättta sat up, rubbing her eyes and looking around the dark-ish room. Hiccup immediately moved towards her so that she could see him, and the child's eyes brightened. "Uncle Hiccup! Is Toothless here, too?"

"Nope, sorry about that," the young man replied, sitting down on the

stool beside her bed. "But he'll definitely be with me next time we come, and if you're recovered enough, and promise to keep the secret, I'll take you on a short flight. But only if the weather's nice."

"It's been nice while I was here, no rain at all," she said with a pout, eyes already beginning to brim. Hiccup shushed her quietly, cupping her tiny head with his large hand to stroke her hair, and instigating her involuntarily to climb into his lap. He looked at her worriedly for a second, until she grabbed onto his tunic, and then he just held her.

"Hey! you're going to be alright, little shieldmaiden. They'll let you out to play soon, you'll see," he soothed, rubbing her back. Goethi sipped her mead, watching with interest. The way that boy was looking at the precocious child! well, if there ever was an interesting look.

"How'd you know?" she asked in a whimper. "I wasn't naughty, but they wouldn't let me out, then my chest hurt!"

"But now it doesn't hurt, does it?" he asked, still in his gentle voice. "And they let me in to visit you! They weren't letting any visitors in, where they? So you must be all better!"

Ã†tta gave him a considering look, eyes bright and intelligent for a babe of merely three. She truly did look like her namesake. Then she nodded and gave him a smile.

"So you'll take me on Toothless?" she asked eagerly. Goethi only just managed to stop herself from snorting. That boy had gotten himself into trouble.

He held a finger in front of his mouth. "But that's our little secret. If you tell someone, I can't take you!"

Ã†tta's eyes rounded and she seemed to consider it; Goethi could almost see the cogs working in her tiny brain, weighing the loss of bragging rights with the actual thing, and then she nodded.

"Meanwhile, I have something to keep you company. Or someone, maybe?"

Hiccup reached into the bag he had on his shoulder and pulled out a doll. Its body was made of cloth, the clothing was stitched leather. The hair was carefully braided straw, and there was actually a tiny metal helmet. Goethi stared; there was mastery and detail even in a tiny doll made for a sick child. Thank Odin the Wise that they had gotten him back. What a mind Berk would have lost.

Ã†tta's eyes had gone so large that Goethi could see it at her distance. The child's arms shot out to the doll and took it up, holding it at arm's length to stare slack-jawed.

"It's Aunty Astrid!" she whispered in awe. Goethi could only guess that a face had been painted onto the cloth face, and this had apparently held some resemblance to her aunt. Again, Goethi had to stop herself from snickering. "Oh, she's so pretty! Thank you so much Uncle Hiccup!"

"You're welcome, Ættta," he said with a hummed laugh, hugging the child who had embraced the doll and burrowed herself into his chest. "You take good care of her now, right?"

"Yes! And then you'll make me an Uncle Hiccup doll too!"

"What?" He blinked at her. "An Uncle Hiccup doll would be ugly."

"No it wouldn't," Ættta insisted. Hiccup chuckled.

"It would be long, long, and thin," he said with a laugh, pulling some straw out of the bedding and weaving it deftly into a long cord, knotting four ends off to make loops for arms and legs, and then finishing it off with a large knot for a head. Ættta looked at it sceptically, but then she snatched it up and put it next to her prettier doll. Hiccup shook his head. "Why would you want a Hiccup doll?" he asked, utterly perplexed.

"Because then, Aunty Astrid Doll would be lonely," the child replied as if Hiccup were a rather dull terror. "She needs her husband Uncle Hiccup Doll, like the real Aunty Astrid."

Goethi had to pinch her nose not to make a noise this time. A mere child could reduce the future chief of Berk, rider of the night fury and conqueror of the Red Death, to red-faced stuttering. She was glad she'd stayed hidden, she'd known this would be priceless.

"I, um. You see, well â€¦ You see, Ættta, Aunty Astrid and I aren't married," he finally managed to say, voice a shade more twitchy than the calm tone he'd used till now. Ættta gave him a confused look.

"But you are! Aunty Astrid lives with you, and mama said that is when a mama marries a papa. So Aunty Astrid's married to you." She seemed to consider for a moment, and then said, in Hiccup's own patient tone. "Did they forget to tell you? I can tell you what my mama told me, if you want."

Goethi was lucky that Hiccup burst out laughing when he did, because it covered the sound of her snort.

"No, they didn't forget to tell me." He looked down at her even more fondly. "See, Aunty Astrid and I aren't married, but we're â€¦ er, going to be married." Goethi's eyes sharpened. Why had there been a note of longing there? Their contract was signed and settled, so he didn't have any reason to sound as though he were speaking of lost love.

Meanwhile, Ættta was still obviously confused, and obviously didn't like being so at all. Transferring both of her dolls to one hand, she gave the young man a punch in the ribs. He looked at her open-mouthed for a moment, and then trying not to smile, attempted a stern look.

"What do you mean by that, now?" he said, and she looked appropriately sheepish. "Go on, answer me."

"I don't understand," she lamented. "Uncle Hiccup's being mean and making fun of me. Mama says you only go to live with someone when you

marry them, to make babies." She looked teary eyed, and Hiccup looked guilty.

"Ah, wait, let me see!" he tried, biting his lip. "Aunty Astrid and I are special. You see, before you get married, there is a time when you are um you make a promise." Åtta blinked up at him. "Like you promised now, not to tell anyone about your ride with me and Toothless, remember?"

With a brighter look, the little girl nodded.

"Right, so Aunty Astrid and I, we made a promise." He hooked his pinky with hers, dwarfing the tiny appendage but clasping it gently. "We promised that I would marry Aunty Astrid, and that Aunty Astrid would marry me. And I hold her here." He took their linked hands up to his chest, hunching over so her tiny arm would reach. "In my heart." Again, that note of longing in his voice. There was something that was not right, there. "But me and my dad didn't have anyone to take care of us, so Aunty Astrid came to live with us early; after the promise, not after we got married. Because otherwise no one would cook for us, and Uncle Hiccup's food tastes like gronkle poop!"

Åtta giggled an 'EW!' and seemed to consider it for a moment, staring intently at her finger still linked with Hiccup's and pressed over his heart.

"Well, that's silly," she said at last. "You should be married." She nodded to herself, as if it were the most logical statement ever uttered. "Aunty Astrid Doll and Uncle Hiccup Doll will be married, too." With tiny, fast hands she grabbed a piece more straw from beneath the bed linens and tied one end around the cloth doll's sewn wrist, while she passed the other through the loop of the woven one, then tied a knot. "There, see, they're married now." Hiccup could only stare at her with a half smile on his face, while Åtta looked at him and the dolls some more, seeming to consider something.

"And when I grow up, I'll marry Uncle Hiccup, too," she said. Hiccup's eyebrows shot up, and Goethi's joined the party. The child's father, one of Astrid's brothers, had been recently lost to a sea storm, and the family still grieved. The child, however, had taken to clinging to the many other male figures in the family, and Hiccup, apparently, had suddenly taken the top seat. Goethi so, so wished she could snicker at his expense.

Åtta seemed happy with her own conclusion, a smile on her face as she hugged the dolls to her and rested her head against Hiccup's chest, for all intents and purposes hunkering down for a cuddly nap.

"Erâ€| Åtta, little one, â€| why do you want to marry Uncle Hiccup?" he asked in a voice that was trying to choke down laughter.

"Well, my name is Astrid, too, but everyone calls me Åtta because Aunty Astrid came first. So if you marry Aunty Astrid, you marry me, too, because we have the same name!" There was a solemn seriousness in her voice, as if she were imparting the gravest secret. Hiccup bit his lips to keep from laughing. Hard.

"Ah, I see, that makes sense," he said, clearing his voice. "But

maybe, we should ask Aunty Astrid if she's alright with it, too."

Ãttta nodded, still with a very serious, business-like expression.
"Because she came first."

Hiccup laughed quietly, giving the child a hug and kissing her crown. "I'm afraid Aunty Astrid will always come first," he said, and the child nodded, only understanding the surface meaning. A glimpse at his eyes told Goethi all she needed to know about what that statement really meant.

The front door rattled and creaked, and Brunhilda came back in, closing the door on a sudden gale that had picked up outside. It was enough to let a gust of freezing wind inside the hall and make them all shudder, the light from the fire turning everything grotesque as the fire faltered frantically. Ãttta whimpered and burrowed more deeply into Hiccup's chest.

"What's this now, young lady?" Brunhilda said sternly, arms akimbo.
"How are you out of bed? I don't recall giving you permission."

"But nana," the child whined in protest, curling herself further in Hiccup's lap. "Uncle Hiccup's here! And I haven't seen anyone in so long! Please, nana. And look!" She uncurled herself from Hiccup's lap, hopping down onto her bare feet to hold up the pretty cloth doll, the straw one hanging off the other doll's tied wrist. "Uncle Hiccup brought me some dolls! This is Aunty Astrid Doll, and this is Uncle Hiccup Doll! Aren't they pretty?"

Brunhilda blinked down at the two toys the child was holding as far up as she could with open eagerness, then looked at Hiccup, who rubbed his head sheepishly.

"Don't look at me," he chuckled. "The Hiccup doll wasn't my idea." Brunhilda gave a bark of laughter and turned to the child again, who was looking up at her hopefully. Goethi was sure she would still get a scolding later, but Hiccup was also looking at Brunhilda with half-hopeful eyes; it was rather disgusting, how adorable that was.

"Oh, alright then. But you will be quiet and not interrupt while we adults speak, are we clear?"

Ãttta gave a cheer and ran headlong at Hiccup, throwing herself into his lap, and he put a quick arm around her when she looked like she was going to topple over. She scrambled up like a tiny terrible terror and curled up in his lap again, head against his chest as she began to play with her new dolls.

"Look at you, already with bairn in your lap," Brunhilda said with a laugh as she brought a stool beside him. She too seemed to have forgotten Goethi was there, because her back was to the fire, and she partially obscured Hiccup from the healer's view. It annoyed Goethi - but it was a small price to pay in order to gauge what was going on in that head of his. Hiccup shrugged, a half smile on his face - which was thankfully clearly visible over Brunhilda's shoulder. "And I have to thank you; what you did for her meant a lot to us, Hiccup."

"I don't mind. Astrid's been really upset about her, and I wanted to see how she was." He smiled down at Ætta when she looked up at him with a beaming grin, laughing lightly as he soothed her hair. "I've never been one for sickness, at least. Never had much for muscle on me, but I've never once been down with a Winter sickness, or a Summer one, so I thought I'd wiggle in to see her. But you let me in, so she's all better, right?"

Brunhilda smiled at him. "Yes, she's out of that wood, thank the Great Mother. It really is all thanks to you and your Astrid; she went to tell Goethi right away, when I was too busy to go. And you went and took that trip to get us those herbs ..." Hiccup seemed uncomfortable with the statement, and Brunhilda latched onto it right away; Goethi had no doubt that the purpose of the comment had been bait in the first place. "Though I have to say, Ætta is not the only one Astrid's been worried about. What have you been doing to her, then, to upset her?"

Hiccup winced visibly, eyes dropping right away. "So she was upset?"

"Of course she was upset, lad," Brunhilda said, sternly but not unkindly. "What did you think would happen? It really is no way to treat a woman, dear, especially the only one in your household."

"I â€| erâ€| "

"You should let her take care of you, lad. If she wants to do it, you know there's no stopping her." She gave a chuckle, but Hiccup didn't follow save with a weak smile.

"Well, she hasn't been coming around with â€| I mean, she's been keeping away, since I â€| upset her." He looked down at the dirt floor between them again, his hand soothing over Ætta's hair almost as if to calm himself.

"Oh, don't mind that dear. She's a bit like her old dad in that way. They get into a bit of a tizzy, they do, and you let them stew over it for a while until one morning everything's fine and dandy as if nothing's ever happened."

Hiccup looked at her with a mixture of hope and horror on his face. Then his expression turned sad, and Goethi could not understand it. "I suppose if that is the way she wants it," he said quietly.

Brunhilda huffed. "Son - and I will call you that, my boy, so no need to blush. I know you care about our Astrid. Very much so - you cared before you left, and I've seen you with her. There's no denying it, so don't you try." Hiccup shrugged, colour tinging his face visible despite how far away from the fire he was.

"But if she is this easily upset, I â€| "

"Well now, I didn't take you for someone who let things drop that easily." Brunhilda said, and her provocation seemed to work, as his eyebrows came together into a frown.

"I'm not one to press a woman into something she doesn't want, either," he replied, and Goethi blinked, along with her new

apprentice.

"Oh, my dear boy, Astrid is just confused by you, that is all." Brunhilda said with a shake of the head. "And she does want to take care of you, of that I'm sure."

"Take care of me," Hiccup repeated, almost bitterly. "There is more to marriage than that, Mother Hofferson. And I'm sorry, but â€œ|" He stopped himself, biting his lip and looking down at the dust floor again.

"Hiccup, you have to try to show her more of what you feel," Brunhilda tried in a gentle tone, and this seemed to anger him even more.

"I've tried," he said, his voice now hard, and almost the voice Cattongue used to address Stoick with when he had first landed on Berk. "And her response was â€œ| not encouraging." He looked at Brunhilda suspiciously, then. "I shouldn't take up anymore of your time. And Toothless and I are expected in the Hall for a meeting very soon."

Âttta had fallen asleep in his lap, thumb in her mouth and dolls clutched to her belly. With all the care in the world, he put her into her cot gently and then covered her, standing and turning to give Brunhilda a nod before exiting the hall without another word.

Brunhilda was left looking obviously upset, and Goethi gave a sigh, which seemed to startle her.

"Oh Goethi! I thought you had left!" The old healer slipped off her stool, moving out of the fire's circle and sitting on the seat Hiccup had just vacated. "What did you think of that, Mother Goethi?"

The elder woman shook her head, scribbling a few things in the dirt. It took Brunhilda a while, but she finally deciphered it. Hopefully, she would get used to her scrawls quickly - and more efficiently than Gobber. "Yes, I agree. He's not the trusting, open child he used to be, isn't he?"

Goethi nodded with a sigh, and both women looked at the door he'd just left through. There had been a gleam of suspicion and guardedness in his eyes before he'd excused himself of the conversation completely. There had never been such a shadow in Hiccup's eyes before he'd returned from his five years of absence; many a prank had been played upon him because he'd innocently followed one of his peers into a place where he could be tricked. The moment he had felt Brunhilda pressuring him into speaking, however, he had bowed out elegantly and with little chance for argument.

"And there's something there, too, isn't there?" Brunhilda turned to her again, a mother's worry clearly in her eyes. "He does still care for my Astrid, doesn't he?"

Goethi nodded without hesitation and scribbled some more. After a lag, Brunhilda bit her lip. "Oh no, mother Goethi, you really think so?" Goethi nodded again. "But he can't really be doubting my Astrid. She's never even looked at another man â€œ| no, that's not what you mean? Then â€œ| oh, you think he doubts she wants him?" Goethi gave a

sad sigh and a nod. "Pretty pair they are, one doubting the other in this way. None of us had this nonsense about our heads when we were youths in our marriage."

Goethi gave her a sharp look and scribbled, then waited. "Yesâ€œ I suppose you are right. It is born of the uncertainty in their unusual situation. I can understand why Stoick hasn't married them off yet, with the Thing to take care of, and Hiccup all but just out of bed â€œ still, if they keep doubting one another like thisâ€œ!"

Goethi nodded with conviction. Brunhilda bit her lip in a near frantic worry.

"Oh, my poor children. I will talk to Astrid, tell her to be more clear with him, and -" she stopped when Goethi shook her head, the elder woman looking at her with no space for argument. She scribbled one last thing. "They need to talk to one another? Yes, I agree, but perhaps, if I could facilitate it?" Goethi shook her head firmly. From what she'd seen, Brunhilda trying to intervene had only hardened Hiccup, making him feel cornered instead of giving him an outlet to open up. He obviously didn't trust others as easily as he used to, and though that hadn't diminished his natural kindness, it had the effect of making him rather reluctant to let others direct him into a course of action.

It was not surprising, seeing that the child had been on his own for so long, fending for himself and getting by with people outside of Berk, who were none-too-gentle with strangers and, possibly, innocent children. He'd probably been led into a trap at least once; and this time it had not been a childish prank played by his peers. If it had been what left those scars on his face, and if there were more of the like on other places on his body, then it was no wonder that he let no one lead him into corners, in conversation or in life.

Goethi slipped off her stool again, reaching over to pat a still-anxious Brunhilda before moving towards the door. And while she meant exactly what she said regarding Brunhilda meddling with this affair, she also knew that she, herself, needed to follow it carefully. And perhaps, if she could help, she would.

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Thuggory was practically standing on top of his dragon, using the reigns to try not to slip off and fall to his untimely death. Dusk had long ago given way to the first strains of the night, and poor Fanghorn would probably flop down and fall asleep the moment they landed, but Thuggory himself was too excited to feel any of the fatigue, at least not yet.

As soon as the rocks of Berk began to appear, the natural ramparts of it's cliff-formations appearing welcoming despite their raggedness, Thuggory gave an elated yell which seemed to give some energy back to his poor thunderdrum. The land was quiet and silent up ahead, but suddenly they spotted two rows of flickering lights that made a pathway in the darkness.

"Thinks of everything, doesn't he?" Thuggory snickered. Fanghorn circled once, and the Meathead heir had time to see how far behind he'd left the rest of his party; well, they were visible in the

moonlight. As distant twinkles. It wasn't too late that all the good people of Berk would be in bed, so he gently nudged the dragon beneath him. Who gave him a grumble and a glare.

"Go on, my friend, you wouldn't disappoint your loyal rider, now, would you? After all, I know you want to come in with style, even if you're tired. Go on!"

Fanghorn gave him a look that clearly told the heir he knew he was being manipulated, but complied anyway as he gave a sonorous roar intending to alert the populace of their arrival, as well as let the rest of their flying Meatheads know that they had arrived, in case they had not spotted Berk in the moonlight yet.

Fanghorn didn't wait for Thuggory to be ready, and simply directed his wide blue body towards the two rows of light, landing on the smooth grass that had been marked evidently for the occasion.

Other shining dots of flickering gleam began to move towards them, and a night guard spotted them first. giving a 'hulla' and then turning to holler at the rest of the village to announce their arrival officially. Fanghorn gave a groan as Thuggory descended, and the man was instantly by the great toothed head of his friend.

"Hey, big man. I'm sure they're going to have fresh fish and warm hay for you, you'll see. You can rest the night and be good as new tomorrow morning," he whispered, giving the dragon a head-scratch, and the wetting his hand with his drinking water to splash some onto him. Fanghorn closed his eyes and gave a grateful groan, leaning into the liquid with evident rapture.

"Thuggory!"

He rose with one last pat, craning his head expectantly as a group of people began approaching. But he'd never mistake that voice-

"My brother!" he roared, launching forward the moment he spied Hiccup's lithe body leading the group. He had been worried sick with fear that the poison blood and fever of his wounds would take him from them, and even though he'd stayed long enough to see him recovering, his father hadn't let him stay as long as he'd preferred. Letters had been sent through the dragons and through Trader Johann, but they were so long in coming, and often got either blown off-course or arrived wet and partly illegible. "Let me look at you!" He went on, stepping back to slap Hiccup's shoulders. He seemed to have put on some more weight since they'd last seen him, but that may have been because bedsheets and sallow cheeks make everyone look thin. Hiccup was standing straight though, shoulders wide under the fur vest, suede trousers showing off the gleaming metal of his new foot as embroidered wool and sheepskin tunic finally made him look like a man of his proper station.

"Thuggory!" he said with a smile and just as much enthusiasm. "Welcome to Berk! You're early! Did you just hop on 'Horn and scream here when you got bored on that good-for-nothing island of yours?" They laughed as Hiccup clapped his shoulder. "Where's Heather now? Clover's more than fast enough to keep up with 'Horn'!"

As Hiccup was craning his neck to look around him for the wayward wife, Thuggory couldn't help his grin getting wider - his cheeks were

honestly hurting, because he'd been smiling like an idiot all week. This, though, was better than usual.

"She isn't coming by dragon," he replied slyly, making Hiccup look at him in askance. "The healer wouldn't have it. She's coming on the boats with the rest of the women."

"How did she not kill you for â€| wait, the healer? Is she alright?"

"Nothing seven more months of rest and no flying won't take care of!" he dropped, leadingly, waiting for his friend to catch on. Hiccup blinked at him, looking blank as a rock slate after the sea's had its way with it, and Thuggory exchanged a look with his tired dragon. Well, now â€|

"Oh!"

Thuggory blinked, having momentarily forgotten that there had been other people with his best friend to greet him. The girl he was engaged to - ah, Astrid! - was standing there, eyes wide and golden hair shining in the torchlight as her lips formed a tentative smile. "Seven months â€| have two passed already, then?"

"Aha!" he elbowed Hiccup, making Toothless grumble and swat him with a tail - how had Thuggory missed the dragon? Black hide or not, those luminous eyes were pointed straight at him, even if they were behind the girl, rather than in their usual place beside Hiccup. "This one's sharper than you! Be careful, or you'll find yourself wearing the skirts while she sports the britches!"

"You mean I'll be following your example?" he replied innocently, and Toothless, Fanghorn and Astrid laughed. He huffed in mock annoyance, slapping his front and pushing it at him. "Oh, ew, Thug, please; I'm not interestedâ€|"

"Ha!" He grabbed the taller man's head, rubbing his hair furiously, "I'll tell you who wears the skirts!" Hiccup laughed breathlessly, trying to push him off. "You're about to be an uncle, and all you can do is rebuff my flirtations? I'll show you what happens when you hurt my feelings!"

"You become Thughilda the hideous and everyone runs for the hills?" Hiccup replied, grabbing him in a choke-hold himself and making them both laugh as they struggled together.

"Oi!" Thuggory found himself tossed backwards, and suddenly he was looking at Snotlout. His eyes narrowed.

"What do you want, Snotface the 'don't-do-what-you're-told'?" he replied with a hiss, standing straighter and stepping forward so his own barrel chest was only inches from the other man's. Hiccup quickly got between them.

"Peace, peace. We were only fooling around, 'Lout, don't worry. Thug," Thuggory was very surprised to see stern displeasure in his little brother's eyes. "Snotlout's made amends, ok? So I don't want to hear that again. Please," one corner of his mouth lifted in that typical way of his, and Thuggory found himself answering the smile without even trying. "We don't need to kick off the Thing talks with

a fist fight, do we?"

"I think that's an excellent idea!" Thuggory almost winced. The other dragons of their party had begun to land, and his dad slid off Clover's back. It had been murder to convince the dragon to leave Heather behind, but while there were more than enough terrors on the ships to deal with any rats and any problems, there was little chance of a goodly sized dragon fitting on one. And since Clover would not be left behind either, his dad had agreed to ride him to Berk. It had been an interesting flight. Never to be repeated again.

"Look what the grey sea washed up!"

They were saved from further exposure to his dad's opinions by Stoick, now came up to the party and knocked chests with the Meathead chief. Within moments, insults began to fly, and both big men had each other in a headlock that knocked their helmets off.

"I can see the resemblance," Astrid said wryly, and Hiccup gave her a sheepish smile that she held for a few moments. Then they both did they blush and look away? Aww, that was adorable. And also stupid; they were to be married and almost in their twentieth summer, for Frigga's sake! He rolled his eyes, and was amazed to see that both Toothless and Snotlout had done the same. Hmm! so this wasn't something new. It warranted investigation. Ignoring the noise and bluster of the two men, now rolling around in the dew-wet grass in an impromptu wrestling match, he slung his arm around Hiccup again.

"So, my brother, have you forgotten your manners or has the pretty lady taken up too much of your brain," he said with a sly look. He got an elbow to his belly and a fist to his arm for his trouble. Hiccup and Astrid looked at one another in askance for a moment. "Ow! What? Abuse of a guest!" He gave Hiccup a wide smirk. "She's been teaching you Viking manners well! Now, how about some food and shelter for the tired travellers?" More of their dragon party began to land, and the torch-dotted clearing began to feel crowded. Hiccup slapped his back and began leading them all up towards the Great Hall, dragons and all.

Thuggory, however, had a moment to exchange an asking glance with Snotlout, who had also been eyeing Hiccup and Astrid with a belligerent look. He didn't trust the man; he knew that he'd had his eyes on Hiccup's woman before his little brother had returned to reclaim his rights, and no matter what Hiccup said, once an asshole, always an asshole. Toothless, however, was giving those two the same glance and Snotlout was the only one of the two who spoke his language. Maybe if he could somehow get the both of them together and alone from anyone else, he would be able to get to the bottom of that tingling sensation at the back of his neck.

And of course, Cami should be here soon, and Dogsbreath. And his beloved, manipulative wife. They'd have it all sorted in no time.

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Tuffnut stood at the entrance of the hall, polished and clean, actually washed for once even though it wasn't washday, debating whether or not he should go in.

On the one hand, he was hungry. Very hungry. Hungry enough to climb the steps up here and then stare at the big wooden doors for almost half an hour.

On the other hand, the hall was the last place he wanted to be. The really, really, last place. He'd take Mildew's house over the Hall right now, it was so the lastest place he wanted to be. He knew who was in there, and he also knew who else was in there, and right now, he didn't want to see either one of them.

Well, no, he wanted to see one of them very much. Very, very much. But he couldn't go blow things up with her the way they had planned, and he didn't know how to say they couldn't because he didn't want to say they couldn't, so he hadn't bothered to try to think how to say they couldn't.

There was also the other one. Now, the other one he really didn't want to see. The lying cheat. And no one would believe him when he said she was lying, either! He hadn't been drunk that night, he knew exactly what he'd said, knew what he'd done, and he certainly hadn't said that and hadn't done that. He'd remember if he'd done it. Right?

No, yes, definitely; he'd remember. And the knots on his trousers were too complicated for anyone but him to remove - and his sister, but that was only because she had learned the knots he used in order to de-pant him in front of as many people possible. And little girls - the little girls squealed loudly and hid their faces like wusses. It was funny. And that was before. they were more complicated now.

And the old ladies too... though he didn't want to think of old ladies right now, not with how much he didn't like his mum. Or ladies; ladies right now sucked. Sucked and lied and got men into trouble they hadn't even enjoyed no matter what they said.

"Hey Tuffnut!" He jumped and swerved, turning to see Gustav staring up at him with a broad grin while his nadder Baldr rubbed his head against the smaller boy's shoulder. To think, Gustav had once idolised Snotlout - he was growing to be a lot more like Hiccup; a surprisingly stubborn beanpole.

"Oi, Gustav. How's it ...erâ€| going?" The doors to the Hall had opened and closed to let one of the Svens out. By the way he greeted the boy and his nadder, it was probably Sven 'Fleetfoot'; Tuff knew that this Sven's little girl was in the same class as Gustav for dragon training. But that hadn't been what had distracted Tuffnut. Oh no, it had been the high, loud laugh, the rucus going on inside, and the unmistakable drawling voice of one lady in particular.

All was not ok in his world - not ok at all - when just the echo of a laugh and a drawl could make his chest feel like Flat-Fart was sitting on him again, and he couldn't get his feet to move from that spot, either into the Hall, or away from it.

He could still hear his sister, swearing she'd get him out of this mess, somehow. Lucky her - she'd escaped to Fishlegs' family, and could safely disown their mother. Tuffnut had been left with a sobbing mess of a woman clinging to him while he wished he could have

nothing to do with her. And also, Flat-Fart sitting-on-his-chest feelings every time he heard that voice.

Ung, he should go. But he was hungry!

"Tuffnut, sir," Huh, that puffed his chest out a little. Since Hiccup had taken charge of the young ones, they'd started learning some serious respect. Hiccup had been drumming it into them as he taught them about flying reptiles, and it was working like a charm. Sven had obviously moved on from talking with Gustav, and the young boy's attention had returned to Tuffnut. The young teen's tall, stringy body was rife with hesitation as he looked at Tuffnut like he was thick in the head- oi!

"What?" he replied with asperity. Gustav gave him a look that said he wasn't taking it - apparently, 'sir' with respect was only reserved to Hiccup. Phaw, some fairness to the heroes of the village!

"You've been standing here for a long time, sir. Do you need anything?"

There, a spark of sunlight in the clouds! "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do! See, I would like to eat, but since I'm so popular with the ladies and there are a few of my uglier conquests in there- " No, no, what was he saying? This kind of talk got him into trouble in the first place! And at least one of his conquests in there was most certainly not ugly at all! No, no talk of conquests! "and, erm, ah-hem_, get me a plate of mutton, cadet Gustav Larson!"

"Of course!" The boy replied, moving towards the large wooden double doors. He was almost thrown on his back when they were opened, however, and the object - very, very not-ugly not-object - of his consternation was standing there, arms akimbo, blonde hair wild and scowl on her face.

"You! I thought I heard you!" She took two strides forward till she was snarling in his face. Then she reared back and slapped him.

"That's for not answer my last two letters!" She scowled at him some more, then looked him up and down. A smirk bloomed on her face, she stepped forward again and kissed him.

They'd only kissed once - before she had left back for Bog - and he'd been in happy-land for days after. Even his sister almost twisting his arm off couldn't get the smile of his face - which pissed her off, he he he. But now, oooh boy, she wasn't holding back, and -ow, that was his back against the wall, and man, that was Gustav running away like a ninny because this woman was crazy, and he was totally right, but - WHOA! He squeaked; no, uttered a high-pitched utterance in a totally manly way! - as she tried to stick her hand down his trousers.

Yeah, yeah, damn it all to the Jotun, he'd missed her. Missed her and missed her and he'd keep missing her because it was all messed up worse than his cousin Larse's bed head.

"That's for looking good enough to eat," she said, finally moving away, then giving him another appraising look and a smirk. Asgard, her lips were swollen. "Astrid's right, it works_. " Oh no, the ladies were giving each other tips. He was doomed. They were all doomed. "Now get in here and have a keg with us! We're celebrating!"

Thuggory is going to have a daughter!"

"A SON!" came the answering roar from inside the hall. Cami cackled in that evil, terrible way he loved so much - no, nope, liked. Liked, that's all - and grabbed his hair and dragged him into the hall. And whoa her ass swinging on those tight, tight britches were the best thing he'd seen in a long, long, long while. Since she'd last been here, in fact.

Yeah, he was sure, he would remember it. Lying whore. she wouldn't even have gotten him 'up' - not when this was what worked, and she paled in comparison. He raised his eyes, and found Cami giving him a catty look over her shoulder, hand still tangled in his hair. Feeling prickles at the back of his head, he also know that at least one member of his family was also in the hall. Or that possibly that lying, deceitful barmaid was here, glaring at him like she could make him even more unhappy than she already had.

Cami looked at him again as they approached the table, and her smirk got predatory - oh boy, and her lips were still swollen from before.

He was doomed. He was very, very doomed.

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Dogsbreath knew he wasn't known for expressing much of what was going on in his head - it was a trait his father had hammered into him since he'd been a boy. It was a disadvantage in politics to wear your heart like your face, and he had always had a natural affinity with silence.

He was, in his defense, slightly sloshed. And it was a happy occasion. Thuggory's party had arrived first, and the Bog's group had met Dogbreath's own as they flew towards Berk. Once their tired dragons had been settled, and once Dogsbreath himself was sure that Farthog was snoring contentedly he followed his father and his friends to the Hall, where a number of warming and very welcome dishes were put in front of them all.

And the mead. And ale and cider.

Right now, Thuggory and Cami were engaged in a drinking contest while all the table banged on the wood of their kegs and the table-top at the rhythm of chug-a-chug-chug. When Cami put the keg down first, colour high on her face and eyes shining bright in challenge, the table roared, and Thuggory slammed his own down demanding a rematch.

Dogsbreath laughed along with his fellow heirs, as this was the third or fourth time that this happened. The Hall around them was alive with noise as the other members of their flying parties chatted loudly and merrily, being fed and watered, or else surrounded their table to join the merriment, banging noises and placing bets on the drinking that had started small and were now escalating to full chickens.

He spotted his own father, two tables down, having a boisterous conversation with Stoick, Bertha and Brawlknife. Or, rather, the other two were Boisterous - his father was drinking with them and

smiling, but letting them all talk. Much like he liked to do it himself.

And there was a lot to observe. The UglyThugs weren't bringing anyone by boat - they'd decided to bring all the family of the chief by dragon as a tribute to Hiccup. It had taken twelve dragons, ten for the family, two to carry the necessary luggage and gifts. Apart from Dogsbreath's immediate family, Four generals and one of their daughters had come along. Why his father had allowed that, he had no idea. Their offerings were generous, however, and he knew that Hiccup would appreciate some of the books they'd brought along.

The two other dragon-initiated tribes hadn't taken the same route - and of course, with Thuggory there was no way that they could, seeing his wife's gravid condition. The Bog women also had a different system which forced ships to be involved; The Chief's family - basically, Bertha and Cami - had come by dragon. But there was to be a representative of each clan from Bog at every Thing, so that decisions could be discussed uniformly. Dogsbreath took a sip of his ale. His father had been right when he'd said the Things were not as boring as they looked; they were, in fact, extremely instructive.

Like; Stoick was on good terms with all the other chiefs who had arrived till now, even his own father; all of their body language - and all the mead - spoke volumes of a long-standing friendship as well as a steady alliance. There was something worrying them all, however, and he was sure that he wasn't going to be privy to it. Had his father wanted to tell him, he would already have.

There were other things to see, too; Thuggory seemed to be undecided whether to approach or reject the Jorgensen member of their table. Dogsbreath himself wasn't feeling much sympathy towards him, but there was a certain new air around the man - much less bluster in the direction of himself, and more of a steadfast presence at Hiccup's side - which made him reserve his judgement. He needed to sit out some more time before he formed a steady head on that one. Cami was not difficult; she was openly flirting with the Thorston man, who seemed more than a little flattered with her attention, but also reticent. It was very strange; Dogsbreath had thought there was an arrangement in place before she left.

"Astrid!"

With mounting interest, especially since Hiccup had had at least three kegs, and from what he'd heard that tended to loosen up his inhibitions without putting him in the dangerously blaberry zone. He was right now looking bright eyed and rosy-cheeked at the doors, hand raised as far as it would go as he called to his betrothed. Astrid came up to the table with a quick step, and Dogsbreath was pleased to note that her eyes were still as sharp as the last time he'd seen her, though tired, and that they were trained exclusively to his friend's face.

Taking a discreet sip of his own drink, Dogsbreath edged slightly closer to hear their murmurs over the din of the hall. Astrid sat beside Hiccup, and his arm was instantly around her in a way, judging by her eyes and her blush, that was unusually forward for him. The mead in his head however seemed to have made unable to pick that up, and Astrid herself seemed to settle into his touch quickly enough,

and reciprocate it with a hand cupping his waist.

"... never thank you enough," he finally caught her saying earnestly, looking up at him with an emotion in her eyes he wasn't familiar with. It was warm and solid, and there was a shine to it that made her face bright.

"It wasn't anything, really. The least I could do," Hiccup replied with a wide grin. Astrid bit her lip and let her eyes roam his face with a smile.

"You always say that when you've done something beautiful and important," she said fondly, and Dogsbreath had to stop himself from snickering at how accurately she had his measure. "Whatever you think of it, Hiccup, I think it's the most beautiful thing you've ever done. Even more than all the fanfare of the Red Death. You saved little Ætta with those herbs, and I know I'll never forget it."

She kissed him gently, and Dogsbreath's eyebrows moved up to his hairline as he could swear his usually shy and modest friend moved to deepen it - how much mead had he really had? - before wolf-whistles from the fairly drunk Cami and Thuggory.

"That's my brother!" he said in a slur. "Already moving in to try to catch up with me! But it's all for nothing! My wife and I got there first and we'll have the eldest heir of all the archi-arcti-islands!"

Whatever amorous haze had come over Hiccup snapped off him in an instant as he moved away from Astrid quickly, bumping into Dogsbreath's side in the process and looking like someone lit his face on fire.

"Shut up, Thug," he said with some actual annoyance in his voice; a far cry from the usual teasing insults and banter that often flew between the two men. "Astrid and I aren't married yet, so don't â€œ shut up.â€"

The anger in his friend's voice went unnoticed by the drunk Meathead heir, but luckily, Cami came in with some of her patent teasing that the baby was destined to run away and become an Irish farmer with Thuggory as a father, and it quickly diverted the drunk Meathead's attention from further pressing the unwanted teasing. Dogsbreath took another sip, letting his eyes slip to the side under the cover of his keg and watching the two supposed lovers.

Lovers they were not, he concluded. If their sudden rigid posture said anything, it was that one or both of them was uncomfortable with insinuation. By the way Hiccup had reacted, he had seemed to be the one the this insinuation annoyed initially. However, Astrid now seemed completely unable to sit still, or even look at him, and Hiccup's miserable glances towards her spoke volumes on their own.

Dogsbreath took another long sip as a cover to turn away from the two. It was interesting, and slightly sad, as he remembered the night in the lighthouse months ago, where Hiccup had finally pried open his Cattongue persona, and Cami had revealed his long-suffering emotions for the girl. But it was also very strange; why was she open and affectionate towards him one moment, and cold and distant the

next?

He'd have to ask his mother about it. His father and himself always consulted her in matters of female hearts and emotions; they were as impenetrable as the quicksand of a bog, and no easy feat to decipher. He was glad that, for the moment, he wasn't yet to worry about surviving the quagmire.

"There were all sorts of them!" the Thorston was saying excitedly. "Hiccup knew all their names, but I can't be arsed to remember â€| some of them were like yours, Thuggory, and there were these utterly massive ones that could swallow you whole! Then there was this two-headed sea dragon like my Flat-Fart, and Hiccup bailed us out of there faster than you can say night fury!"

"Ever the cautious man," Cami said with a chuckle. "I prefer mine cocked and dangerous." Dogsbreath almost spit the ale from his mouth; Asgard, he'd heard that Bog women were forward, but this wasâ€|. well. The Thorston certainly looked flattered now. A barmaid slammed two mugs in front of them roughly, however, interrupting their rather steamy looks at one another with a thunderous scowl.

"Don't you go forgetting yourself now, Tuffnut. No need for that to happen more than once, is there?" she said, purposefully handing the kegs to Thuggory and Cami and taking the half finished one in front of the male twin.

"Shut up Ingrid, no one asked you!" he replied furiously, red in the face with more than mead and flirtation now. With a growl, he got up, taking up the helmet he'd dropped earlier and slamming it down onto his head. "I'm going â€| I'm going. See you tomorrow."

And with that he turned and left, leaving a seething, open-mouthed Cami and a rather startled table. The din in the rest of the hall prevented anyone else from noticing, though she was sure that Bertha would hear about it later - he would also take care to inform his father. Anything concerning the Bog women was important to know, and the now-fuming one in front of him was a dangerous and utterly unpredictable loose arrow.

Hiccup got up with a sigh, then looked at Astrid. "Um, I should probablyâ€| you mind?" he said, obviously quite a bit more sober than he'd let on earlier, his tone kind and polite, but lacking most of the overt hesitation and warmth of before. Astrid immediately shot to her feet, bumping the table in her haste and moving out, saying something about having more to do before she darted out. Hiccup looked after her for a moment before he sighed and nodded to Snotlout, who was instantly on his feet and following the thinner man out.

With all of Berk leaving the table, Dogsbreath was left blinking at his two remaining companions, one frowning horrifyingly into her alcohol while the other â€|

"One! Mead keg on the Mead Hall wall! ONE! Mead keg on the wall!" Oh. Oh no. It had taken them hours to get him to stop that last time at his engagement, and then the rest of them had been humming it or cursing the others for humming it for the rest of the week. Dogsbreath groaned, flagging down another barmaid - NOT Ingrid, because he didn't think she would survive being at least fifteen feet

from Cami right now - for some more cider. He'd need it if he was going to survive the rest of the night. He counted his stars, again, that UglyThugs were allowed to marry a lot later than the other tribes, and that any designs he'd had had come to nothing. Women, ungl.

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Misunderstandings, misunderstandings and more misunderstandings. I hope it is quite clear right now that the major problem these two have is that they do not know how to talk to one another. At least, not yet. The reasons for that are going to be explored soon.

Of course, now, the volatile chemistry of Tuffnut and Cami, and their own situation, has been added to the mix. Not to mention that there is going to be the Thing coming up soon, so of course: Politics.

And, internet, meet **Ã†tta; Ã†tta, meet the internet. She is going to be the flag bearer of the babies theme.**

8. Part 2 - The Thing - Natural Disasters

Buckle-down, everyone. Shit is about to get real. The Heaviness is going to increase by a considerable margin.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Part 2 - The Thing<p>

**Chapter 6 - Natural Disasters**

**A tornado of thought is unleashed after each new insight. This in turn results in an earthquake of assumptions. These are natural disasters that re-shape the spirit.**

â€• _**Vera Nazarian**_

The Great Hall was full, and the wind howling outside made everyone who was in there huddle against the open fires, while those who could avoid this and stay home were very glad for it.

Hiccup, of course, couldn't stay home and avoid this. In fact, he was front and center in the middle of it, with his father on the main seat, and Astrid beside him. They were both dressed in their best clothes, and to be honest he was glad for her presence, despite the fact that she looked so beautiful that he could scarcely look at her.

He'd gotten little sleep, and last night had been an ordeal. Tuffnut had had too much to drink already, and Hiccup was sorry to say he'd finally found out what was wrong with his friend on no uncertain terms. One of the barmaids had accused him of taking her maidenhead,

and his family had landed him right in the middle of an arrangement that drove a cart and dragon through whatever it was that had been blooming with Cami. They'd spent most of the night, Snotlout, Toothless and himself, tiding Tuffnut over until he was sober enough to return to the village, providing an ear (in Hiccup's case), a bludgeon (in Snotlout's case) and some trees to duke it out against (in Toothless's case). It had been troubling to see the usually upbeat man so angry and morose, and when he wasn't drunkenly swearing up and down that the knots on his pants were more complicated than the poetry map of Hamish Haddock's treasure, he was saying things about Cami that tugged at very specific chords in Hiccup's chest.

Hiccup swallowed as he dared to take a look at Astrid. Her hair was only half braided, some of the beautiful flaxen locks curling around her shoulders as a sign of her semi-spoken-for status. There was jewellery around her neck he had given her (as well as one of her beautifully crafted Mjolnir pendants, which someday he hoped to own a specimen of), and her clothes were a mix of green coloured wools and white fur, a tan fur cloak attached by a broach he had never seen. In fact, the tunic that she was wearing was the closest thing to a dress that he had ever seen her in - or would ever, probably. She was still a warrior above all else, and he was proud of her for it - Hel, he'd hide all the apron-dresses she ever received, if he had to, and take the blame for her not wearing them.

Tuffnut's misery last night had added heaps of guilt to his already tight chest. He'd had a head fogged by the mead and ale he'd drunk, and now he couldn't be sure that she had initiated the kiss last night. However, it seemed that every time he did kiss her, something happened to drive another wedge between them. Snotlout had cuffed him on the head after they had taken Tuffnut home, angrily telling him to get his shit together with Astrid, and Toothless had even given him the silent treatment for the rest of the night while he stared at the ceiling - and, more often than not - the reed and wooden wall that now closed off what had once been the loft he'd slept in.

Just man up and tell Astrid that he liked her didn't sound like bad advice, until he thought of the possibility that she was to this contract what Tuffnut was to his own, and then a lump formed in his throat that he couldn't swallow.

He didn't want to break the contract. He didn't want her to break it either; he wanted it to work with all his heart, but he didn't know how to go about initiating anything. The only times he'd tried, it had landed him straight into the realm of awkward silences and stolen glances while his chest felt like he'd swallowed a stone. He needed to make her happy - badly. He wanted her to look at him with a smile, simply happy to be in this place with him which he had prayed for so much. Yet, how was he to do it without forcing advances on her that she obviously didn't want? How was he to speak of what he wanted from this contract without making her feel the obligation to make him happy that was required of a wife - future wife - in any marriage, arranged or love-match? He didn't feel that he could ask anything of her, he was afraid to ask for anything at all, because, what right had he? It would only make her feel more trapped, and drive her farther away. And yet, he couldn't stay where he was, either; the place-in-between he felt he was in was chaffing and suffocating.

It wasn't even just her - Berk felt like it was closing in on him

sometimes. He missed the hours of flying with Toothless, the open sky and the birds. Missed the early Winter mornings and late Spring afternoons spent with his friend exploring the inhabited and uninhabited lands and visiting the different tribes with the leisure of being nobody important. Even when his help with the dragons and his smithing had given him some status that guaranteed his stay, it had never been more than that of a comrade, a friend in arms. Berk was different - the same villagers who had clamoured for him to get back inside and rolled their eyes while they huffed at him (rightfully enough - he'd probably destroyed more homes than the dragons did, sometimes), were now seeking him out constantly, leaving him with barely a minute of his time where he was free to let his thoughts roam, or give his armour and tack attention - or, heck, take his best friend out for a much deserved trip in the skies. His long-suffering dragon took the punishment along with him, refusing to fly on his own with the emergency tail, like the true Battle Brother that he was. Hiccup looked back at Toothless, who was sitting behind him looking almost regal as he observed the people milling around the hall.

Hiccup's eyes followed his; The different chief's families were sitting equidistantly around the oval table, Stoick at the head, with Dogsbreath's people, the Meatheads and the Bog Burglars then spanning the table as the sun turned. He sighed and let the matter go, for an instant, because the hall was almost at full roster; The chiefs were all here. Thuggory, Cami, Dogsbreath and some of the generals of each village were too. A crowd of women surrounded Cami and Bertha, and he understood that they represented the major clans of their island, with more of them yet to come who did not have that much of a stake in power back home. He looked around, letting his mind settle on the delicate balance he was beginning to see forming among the people in the room. He'd travelled among these tribes for months, years even, and knew what made them tick. Hopefully, he'd be helpful.

Then he groaned when he spotted Madfoot the Slippery. He was one of the UglyThug generals who had taken a dislike to him when he'd still been a humble blacksmith roaming the islands looking for work. Madfoot had slighted him very badly, almost costing him an entire week's earnings to appease what the man had felt was an unbalanced and ill-made shield, when the UglyThug had, at the last minute, given it to his son what he had originally ordered for himself, and therefore had Hiccup make it to all the wrong measurements. His nickname wasn't 'Rudefoot' for nothing. Still, what rankled Hiccup most was the man's treatment of his family; he was an oaf and an unabashed animal. Already, this was shaping out to be 'fun'.

A holler and a couple of squeaks made him look up, and then he had to bite down on the inside of his cheek not to laugh as burly men and seasoned Vikings threw themselves out of the way of their Goethi, who had arrived with a stoic face and stony expression, flying like a creature out of Hel's realm as she was carried in by her pack of terrors. They deposited her, rattling her staff as she went, in the other seat of honour beside Stoick, and the entire hall went silent as they gawped at her.

Stoick stood and cleared his voice. Hiccup found himself reaching for Astrid's hand under the table without realising it, and then winced when she stiffened, and pulled away. He didn't dare look at her, and sat on his hands before they could do something stupid again.

"I welcome you all to these early talks before the Thing officially starts. We of the Hooligan, UglyThug, Bog Burglar and Meathead tribes have agreed to meet before the other clans in order to discuss a matter of great importance. And great pride to me personally; My son, and dragons."

There was a holler around the hall in answer to his introduction. Hiccup politely nodded to several calls in his direction from several different tribes, feeling slightly out of place for having taken his father's spotlight; The beaming smile hidden under the beard meant he didn't seem to mind too much, at least.

"Now, I will not mince words. We are glad to have my son back after his journey, and not a little surprised by what he discovered and shared during that time. However, there are certain things that we need to agree upon, before we speak to anyone else of the allied tribes. And of course, there are things Berk needs to tell you all."

There was a murmur at this statement, as it was a rather bold one that heralded a part of his speech that they evidently weren't going to like. Stoick went on, however, with the same half-hidden beaming smile on his face.

"I just wanted to start by making it very clear!" His face had gone stern, but he couldn't manage to keep it that way as his eyes squeezed to show he was grinning again. "That you all need to get your grubby hands off my son, because he's gone and done his journey, and now he's staying right put here!"

A chorus of laughter lightened the mood slightly.

"Ah, unfair, that Stoick!" Brawlknife said with a guffaw, "What's the lad's opinion, maybe he wants to stay away from your stinking beard as much as possible, and prefers our fresher air!"

"You're one to talk about fresh air," Bertha said, her deep voice resonating above the laughs. "With all your farts Freezing to Death is probably a misnomer! I'm certain Gobber's skivvies smell better!"

"And don't you know it," the blacksmith answered, doing that wiggle-brow thing that â€| uck, it made him shudder, but Bertha just laughed heartily at it, and Cami did it right back, making Gobber wink. Urk, he needed a word with Cami.

"But what is the lad's opinion, really," Woolftooth said, and Hiccup suddenly went rigid. Trust Dogsbreath's father to put him on the spot with education and tact. All the eyes in the room turned to him, and a part of him dearly wished he could reach for Astrid's hand again. But no; he was his own man, had been for a long time. He wasn't Hiccup the Useless anymore, and it was about time he demonstrated it.

"All I can say is, it's good to be home, and I don't feel like leaving again any time soon." He gave them what he hoped was a polite, apologetic, but assured grin, and some of the Bog women actually sighed at him.

Which made him feel really, really uncomfortable. Ung.

"Well then, it seems we have come at an impasse," Wolftooth said curtly. "Because I am certainly happy that you have found your home again, and that they have deemed you worthy to keep." Ow. Ow, ow, what? Wolftooth knew everything, didn't he? He spared Dogsbreath a glare, and instantly regretted taking the UglyThug heir into his confidence just before he and his party had left Berk after the Red Death's demise. Evidently, the less he told the other heir, the better. "But we would also like to keep having our dragon trainer about. The dragons have become an intrinsic part of our lives, and we would not like to see them go. However, they are also creatures that can do, perhaps, more harm than others if mishandled."

Hiccup swallowed. He did have a point, and Hiccup had foreseen a part of this. He hadn't thought anyone would challenge his presence on Berk for it, but ¦ well. "To be honest, I do not see that there is that much of a problem," he started carefully. "I've left behind dragon riders who know what to do as much as I do. Dogsbreath, in your tribe and family, for example. Cami and Thuggory in the others. They all helped me defeat the Red Death, their bond with their dragons is the strongest."

"Oh come on, boy, don't dissimulate," Bertha said in her sonorous voice. "We can all admit that our children are good heirs, but none of them can do what you do with the beasts." Toothless, behind him, gave a growl and Hiccup quickly looked back at him and smiled. The night fury didn't look satisfied at being called 'beast', but he knew the look Hiccup gave him meant 'They're Vikings, they can't help it', and he gave the hall a half-lidded look before subsiding with a chuff. "See?"

"Toothless is as intelligent as I am. It's less training and more ¦ friendship," Hiccup shrugged. Toothless behind him warbled an accord, and Hiccup knew without looking that the dragon was giving the room a 'shut up' look. "Do you all feel this way?" Smug nods greeted him from around the room and he folded his arms, huffing. "Well ¦ then we really have reached a bridge. Because I have duties to Berk that I have put off for long enough. I'm sure you wouldn't appreciate if dad asked Thuggory, Dogsbreath or Cami to give up their own duties."

And suddenly, it was all he could do not to blush and wish he could evaporate. He knew these people, he'd spoken to them - respectfully, but eventually as a humble equal - for long enough for it to become natural, and it was coming out now. But right now, this was his father's meeting in his father's village, and he'd just sort of taken over without realising. He turned to the chief woodenly, expecting a look that would set him on fine.

Stoick, on the other hand, was looking at him with ¦

"What do you think, Sir," he blurted, arms still folded in a pretense to look like he still knew what he was doing. Stoick clapped him on the shoulder (ow, did he wish he had his armour on) and turned to address the Hall.

"My son is right; I won't be around forever - especially with you lot nagging like old ladies," he said, getting the desired effect of playful jeers, "and he needs to learn the ropes. I tol' ye all before to get yer hands off him." More jeers and laughs, and one catcall stating he knew the work better than Stoick did from Bertha. "Well,

more of the ropes; he's handling you all like pussies." More jeers. Someone actually threw a mutton leg at him, which he picked from the air and took a bite out of.

"So you are saying that we are on our own with our dragons, now?" Cami said in a bored voice. She turned to look at Gobber, who scratched his bald head. "That sucks. Who's going to teach the little sisters? I certainly won't. I'll blow them up first."

"And I have a child on the way," Thuggory said apologetically, looking at Hiccup with a grimace. Hiccup frowned, rubbing his face. Thuggory was right, and so was Cami to an extent. Still â€œ

"I think you'll all understand that I've neglected my duties to Berk long enough. Our villages have an alliance, and you all know that if one of us has a flaw, all of us have a flaw. I will not be a flawed leader for Berk because I took too much time away from it," he said, as carefully as possible. "I have been helping my father, as it should be, since I have returned, but—"

"Literally from the bed," Gobber said. "We'd 'ave 'ad to tie him up, next, if Toothless didn't do the guarding for us." Hiccup snorted with a slight glare at being interrupted, his dragon giving a rumble, but went on regardless.

"It benefits none of us. I've left you all the things that I've learned, and all that I know." He rolled his shoulders tensely, knowing from their faces that he wasn't selling his point enough, and decided to take on another strategy. "Dad," he said in a low voice before the muttering died down, "I have an idea â€œ may I?"

"I have one too, but â€œ you go first," Stoick conceded. And Hiccup suddenly felt most of the tension leave his shoulders; his dad didn't look nervous at all to leave the floor to him. His dad was looking at him with pride.

He'd arrived. He'd finally arrived. Stoick the Vast was speaking and looking at Hiccup the Useless with open pride, in front of most of the allied clan leaders. A part of him he hadn't realised was still jittery inside him settled.

"I would like to discuss something related with you all," he went on, and his voice quieted down the rest of the underlying talk's hum. "We have been spotting a number of water dragons moving to the south. Not just one or two either, but entire schools of them." He turned to the other heirs, who also looked at one another.

Bertha's eyes widened suddenly. "Oh, yeah! We had a colony of sharks close to Frigga's reef, but they've all suddenly started coming inland. Not attacking, or anything, but â€œ they seem really reluctant to go anywhere too far from the sandy shallows, and we've had one or two shark corpses float in from the stragglers. You think it's related?"

Hiccup nodded pensively. "It could be; most sea dragons are herbivores, but some others are carnivorous, and a shark's a good meal to keep them going." He turned to Thuggory. "How about Fanghorn, Thug. He's been doing ok? Normal?"

Thuggory shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah, he's been â€œ willful. But

that's not unusual for him, so I didn't take too much notice of it."

"Restless?" Hiccup asked, sharply. He gave Toothless a sidelong glance, and his friend also seemed to be seeing a pattern, because he nodded.

"I â€“ yeah," Thuggory said. The dragon in question was sitting just behind him, and the Meathead heir turned to give him a look, which led everyone else who could to do the same. Even though he appeared to be snoozing, the dragon seemed to give the odd twitch now and then that made Thuggory frown,

"And that is not behaviour you noticed before," Hiccup asked leadingly again. Thuggory shook his head.

"See, this is why we need you, boy," Madfoot said, slyly, and Hiccup did his best to ignore the way his hackles rose simply at hearing his voice; the man could always, effortlessly, get under his skin. "You know what you're talking about, and â€“"

"I think," Hiccup interrupted him purposefully, shooting Wolftooth a meaningful look. Till now, only the chiefs and their heirs had spoken, and it was tradition that the generals only spoke up when their chiefs addressed one of them. Putting Madfoot back in line was an inordinary satisfaction that he enjoyed - perhaps a little bit too much. When Wolftooth gave the large man a baleful, if calm, look, watching the man turn puce was more than a little vindicating. "That there may be a migration of sea dragons going on. I'm not certain; this is all speculation here, and anyone's opinion is as good as mine." Yes, perhaps he was enjoying Madfoot's humiliation a little bit too much, nullifying his words like this. Back on track. "I've never seen it happen before; but then, I'm usually inside during the Winter, where all the sane people are."

"Then we should have seen something like that before," Cami quipped. "We're all mad on Bog."

Some of the tension dissipated, and he laughed along with them. With a shake of the head, he went on. "But the thing is this; they were migrating south across the gulf lines. That's more or less where the ships from Hopeless will be coming from. If what you say about the sharks is true, at least a few of them are going to be hungry, and now that we know of this, the sensible thing would be to go with a number of mixed riders from the different villages to lend our allies a hand. But of course â€“" He waved a hand at the table. "First, we have to decide whether the dragon training is a secret that should be shared with our other allied tribes. After all, that is why you have come early, isn't it?"

There was a ringing silence. Hiccup was playing a rather dangerous game, here, but he looked around the hall, and finally at his father, making sure that he was schooling his features. Gosh, this was so much easier when he had the helmet on here on Berk; but he'd done it before, in the other villages, while he negotiated his stay and his trade. He would have been an idiot not to learn to haggle like a fiend, and play a good gambit.

Bertha was the first to break the silence with a good guffaw, her laugh resonating around the hall as her belly bounced behind her

breastplate.

"And you got us right where you wanted us!" Bertha said, still laughing. "None of us can refute that; it is no use, it is why we are here early. Stoick," she turned to her fellow chief, eyes twinkling. "No need to worry about this one. The village is in good hands."

Hiccup felt his cheeks redden slightly as Bertha's eyes returned to him, sizing him up. He had been certain, for the longest time, that Bertha had known who was the one making chainmail and other metal contraptions for her and the sisters of her tribe, but had kept her peace about it. He hadn't been sure whether it was for his own good, or because she didn't want to lose his value as a smith and dragon trainer. Now he was utterly sure that he had, at least, one very powerful ally among the dragon-initiated tribes. He nodded in thanks, and when she nodded back, his certainty was confirmed.

"Very well then," Stoick said, sitting up straighter and chest puffing out. "I suppose my son makes a valid point. As allied tribes, we do not have the obligation to give each others all our weapons and techniques. However, we do give each other protection. In this case, as my son has eloquently put, we would be exposing the dragon training - and this would then mean that, potentially, that the Trollguts and Snailsnorts tribes would also like to partake in the benefits of having tamed dragons."

"I think it is a moot point," Madfoot grumbled testily, and this time Wolftooth glared at him openly. Then he turned to Hiccup considerably.

"Well, I do understand what he means. If you will no longer train outsiders to Berk, then the other tribes would still not be able to join our ranks, because there would be no one to teach them, nor any new interests from Trollguts and SnailSnorts."

Hiccup began to tap his left foot impatiently, ignoring the wooden cup chafing against the woolen sock. His first response was to lose his temper, but he couldn't afford that.

"I am firm on that point," Hiccup replied, "I'm sorry." His foot jiggled restlessly. "I owe some time to my own tribe now. It is only fair." He longed for the open skies and thirsted for adventure; but he was the heir of Berk. He would not let them down this time.

"There may be another solution to that," Stoick said, stroking his beard. "With the dragons, now, travelling has become a â€œ joy, almost. Certainly shorter and more convenient to travel between our tribes in one day â€œ "

"What are you suggesting?" Brawlnife said, looking at Stoick like a nadder, through a tilted head with one eye trained on him.

"My son has been training our own young ones, when his health allows it," Stoick went on, reaching out with his massive arm and curling a palm around Hiccup's shoulder. He tensed, making sure not to show anything on his face, but letting his leg giggle to release the tension. "I was about to give him something I knew he'd enjoy," Stoick turned a warm look at him that made Hiccup stop moving. He

smiled back tentatively, the look on his dad's face something he wished he could enjoy more privately. He'd worn it a few times, recently, by the fire, when he and Stoick shared a chat after the food, the chief and Astrid tending their weapons, and Hiccup usually designing something that needed to be done at the forge. Between the pride, their frequent talks and the open affection that he hadn't bothered to mask since Hiccup had returned, his chest warmed.

"The Arena, as it is now, can no longer serve it's proper use, as it was designed to do in the years passed. Now that my son has freed us all of the Red Death-

"Hear hear!" Bertha said, banging the bottom of her keg on the table in salute, which was echoed by the other two chiefs, Dogsbreath, Thuggory and Cami. Hiccup nodded, feeling rather flustered at being the reason why his father's speech was interrupted.

"The area is being turned into a dragon training arena. A dragon training academy." Hiccup blinked and turned to Stoick again, finding his father beaming at the room. His large, warm hand was still curled around Hiccup's shoulder, and even through the fur and his clothes, Hiccup could feel its weight like an embrace. "So, while my son is correct in saying that he will not be able to attend to the teaching all the time and leave Berk for long stretches of time, it would be easier for him if instead of travelling to the villages, the students could travel to him."

"Hmm," Wolftooth said. "Could Berk take the strain of all those extra mouths to feed?"

"I'm sure we can work something out between the tribes. There will be logistics of numbers, and how many students will be allowed per year. And of course, all of the ones who have already been taught by my son can come lend a hand in the teaching themselves." Stoick nodded towards the heirs and the other dragon riders present. "This can be Berk's payment for your parts and help in our defeat of the Red Death."

Bertha snorted, and other two chiefs laughed. A few of the generals and clan heads present looked either surly, or gave Stoick a complacent smirk. Hiccup couldn't help giving his dad a congratulatory side-long look, which made Stoick sit up straighter and look at the hall with half-lidded eyes. He had managed to hit two pigeons with one stone, and something which was worrying him - the revision of the treaty and the various possibilities for payment that the other tribes were going to ask for after they had sent help. And to do it on Berk's terms.

"Hang on," Brawlnknife said, scratching his beard. "If the Trollguts and Hopeless want in on it, how will it be fair when they sent no help, aye?" A few dissenting comments were murmured, and then quite a few in agreement with it. Stoick frowned slightly, which meant that he was more than a little annoyed that someone wasn't supporting his ingenious plan.

"Umâ€|" Astrid, beside him, said in a low voice. Hiccup turned to her, lowering his head so that she could speak with him without being heard; there were precise rules to speaking turns at the Thing - legend had it that before the rules were put down, every single Thing was nothing more than a yelling fest that persisted until someone

threw the first bench or chicken leg, and that many a war had been declared and resolved with who yelled the worst. Now, instead, it was only the chiefs present who could speak first; Hiccup had been able to address everyone because Wolftooth had called him to speak, and then he in turn had called the other heirs. Another twinge of satisfaction pinched his chest: Madfoot had walked right into it. Astrid, however, could not address the room yet, and was smartly doing it through him.

"Couldn't we fix that with the numbers?" Astrid whispered to him. He did his best to ignore the dangling hair tickling his neck and cheek.

"What do you mean?"

"The clans who helped out get more recruits than the ones who didn't. Stoick already said the numbers will be limited, so it's only fair that the privileged ones get more recruits in."

"That really makes sense," he grinned back. "Do you want—"

"No, no," she said, slightly nervously. She gave him one of her cheeky smiles. "Besides, you're good at it." She looked away quickly, flicking her hair away from her eyes.

"Something to say, son?" Stoick asked. Hiccup almost jumped, still slightly staring at Astrid to try to see if she meant that.

"Oh, yes." He cleared his voice. "Astrid had a suggestion." He looked at her for the last time but she just nodded at him and looked away. "Anyway, I think it's a great idea," He ignored Cami's jeering 'you would', and Thug's wolf-whistle. "If we are only going to have a limited number of places in the Dragon Academy, it makes sense that the tribes who helped in the defeat of the Red Death get the dragon's share. We could distribute the amount so that there are two student for every one of the other two tribes. Of course, I have to leave space for the Berk students, too."

"Hmm. Numbers," Brawlnife said with a sneer. He nudged his son, and Thuggory shrugged.

"We can always talk about the exact numbers when everyone's here," he suggested. He gave a slight frown and gave Hiccup one of their looks; Hiccup knew right away he'd just realised there may be a logistical snag in their plans. "After all, we can't do all the plans without them. It may cause an uproar."

Hiccup grimaced and nodded back, as did a good portion of the people in the hall. His left leg began to jiggle nervously again.

"We have to wait for the other two tribes, that is true," Stoick replied. Hiccup blinked at that statement. Only two? Wasn't thereâ€¦ he shook the thought off and wrenched his thoughts back on track.

"True, but we can at least decide whether we are going to help the Hopeless boats," he sighed. "If we decide to leave it up to the gods, we'll have to hide all of our dragons. There is no way we could justify leaving them to the sea-dragon's mercy and explain the docile reptiles roaming around Berk." His jiggety foot started bouncing up

and down more vigorously. "If I am allowed to express a personal opinion, I am not comfortable with the second option. They are our allies, and it would be ~~an~~ immoral for us not to help when we can."

He tightened his crossed arms, aware that he had said, perhaps, more than he should have. However, the answering grimace on Thuggory's face told him he wasn't the only one. His friend looked up at Brawlknife, who was sneering uncomfortably but shrugged. Hiccup exchanged a look with his father, who also shifted slightly uncomfortably.

"If we're to be truthful, this early meeting is already a violation of that treaty." Wolftooth said casually.

"But a necessity," Bertha shrugged. "And if we let them in on it, and do what Stoick is proposing, I don't see how they can complain. Especially if we save their bottoms. And unless anyone here is a traitor, there is no reason for them to even know we came to this early meeting."

"How would we explain the rescue mission?" Brawlknife asked.

"What's there to explain? We came by dragon, so we were here a bit early because we miscalculated. Then Hiccup here mentioned that he saw that migration on their course, and we decided that we couldn't, in good faith, leave them to it. Simple enough," Cami said, with a shrug much like her mother's. Ever the evil genius, that girl, and he sent a congratulatory smile her way. There was some general muttering, and the feeling of the room as a positive one as heads began to nod more frequently than shake, and raised brows were in greater attendance than frowns.

"Are we in agreement on this, then?" Stoick asked, also being more than versed in reading the mood of the gathered people. The other chiefs gave tacit nods, and he nodded back "Let's cast a vote, then. Those in favour of helping the Hopeless ships, say 'aye'." A vast majority answered strongly. The chiefs nodded to one another. "Then it is decided. The help shall arrive by dragon?" More nods. "How shall we proceed?"

"I like Hiccup's idea to make a mixed group from all the tribes. Like that we can all rake up some gratitude. And I think he should lead us out." Thuggory gave a grin and a rakish wink towards Hiccup as he said that. "He's good at it, or the Red Death's my aunt."

"No, she's your mother in law," Brawlknife said with a snort, throwing the hall into another flurry of laughter and insults. "I've no objection to that, as long as we get equal numbers of riders."

"Same here," Bertha replied.

"I think our children can go, and chose one other with them. Eight riders should be enough. Do you agree, Hiccup?" Wolftooth concluded. Hiccup nodded, wondering at the rapidity of the decisions taken that day; he could only hope that the Thing would go this smoothly, but there was little chance of that, between two other tribal leaders added to the mix, and the generals probably gaining permission to speak, soon.

Hiccup chanced a look at Madfoot. Yup, he still looked green and seething.

"Let's get started, then," Stoick said, standing and signalling the end of the meeting. "Hiccup, gather your riders and some supplies. The Hopeless ships may be on the way already, and we don't have a moment to lose if that's the case."

Hiccup nodded and rose, exchanging a quick look with the rest of the heirs, who turned to start selecting their own additional rider. Hiccup turned at once to his right.

"How soon can you get Stormfly up?" he asked Astrid, who had already risen and was waiting for him and Stoick. She blinked at him.

"What?" she asked, sounding surprised. He shifted, and his stump gave an annoying throb, but he ignored it.

"Stormfly. I need another rider from Berk, and I'd like you to come with me." He gave her a hopeful smile.

"Oh, I thought you'd take Hoark, or Tuff with Snotloutâ€œ!" she bit her lip, looking unsure.

"Nah, we have more then enough firepower with Thuggory and Cami, and we have Dogsbreath's Gronkle so I don't have to take Fishlegs away from his family. But â€œ we need speed." He smiled wider, trying to win her over. "We both know that after Toothless, Stormfly's the she can never top a night fury."

She snorted and smiled for a moment, but then she frowned again.

"I'm responsible for preparing the houses for the tribes," she said with a short huff. "I won't have time, if I come, so â€œ"

"Come on, Astrid. You, um, still have to break that axe in," he tried again. His hand reached out for hers, but he remembered her previous reaction at the last minute and let it drop listlessly to his side. She looked unconvinced. "I need your backup. And like I said, tit-for-tat. I haven't yet paid you back for that afternoon with Baldr, either."

"The heir of Berk can't be seen handling blankets and linens," she said, folding her arms, and he just laughed.

"Why not? I've been handling them since mum's left us." He dared to take a step closer when she stopped evading his eyes. "Please, Astrid. I need your backup out there to balance the team." He didn't dare touch her, though he wanted to cup her shoulder rather badly. She huffed again, but this time she smiled.

And punched his arm. Oh, ow, he'd forgotten how much that hurt without the riding leathers on. He rubbed his shoulder and smiled back at her.

"I'll go get Stormfly ready. She'll like to stretch her wings a little, too." With a final smile, she sauntered out, and to his

shame, he found his eyes trained to her swaying bottom, the long tunic showing off her shape far better than the armoured skirt she usually wore. Odin be praised!

"So, cuz!" Hiccup jumped as Snotlout threw his arm around his shoulders. "When do we oooh." As he spoke, Snotlout followed where Hiccup's eyes had been, and he gave his cousin a leer. "I see, I see. Can't say I don't approve. So, how's things going with pretty cheeks?"

Hiccup instantly elbowed him in the stomach out of pure principle. Snotlout kept cackling.

"Snotlout," he hissed, trying to look as stern as possible while his cheeks burned. It only made his cousin laugh harder.

"No, really, how's it going?" Snotlout asked. Hiccup shifted uncomfortably.

"At the moment it's a bit on pause," he tried to shrug casually, which wasn't easy with his cousin's meaty arm still weighing him down heavily. "We're just too busy, and!"

"Not good, man, not good." Snotlout said. Toothless snorted in apparent approval, and Hiccup looked at him in flabbergasted betrayal. His dragon gave him a half-lidded look in return that oozed 'What? He's right' as surely as if he'd said it in norse. "You have to find time to give her some attention, you know. Ladies like to feel special. Leave her some flowers on her bed, or get her some apple-pie from the baker. Her mother loves apple, she must like them too. Maybe. I don't know!" He shrugged. Hiccup blinked at him.

"You know we're talking about Astrid, right? If I get her flowers, I think she'll make me eat them," he said with incredulity. "In any case, I'll"-

"Hiccup, man, just pay her attention. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about with the ladies." He buffed his nails against his new vest, and Hiccup clamped down on the urge to remind him the one and only time that he'd actually been tempted to kill Snotlout - the hair-drag down the hill. Still!

"Snotlout, you do the rounds of the barmaids. Astrid is not a barmaid." He sighed. "I want her to be happy. I'm not sure I can give her that." Not with marriage, and domestic duties, and everything that was tying her down right now so that she almost refused to go out into battle with him. When had Astrid ever turned down a good fight?

"Not if you don't try, you won't," Snotlout said with an annoyed grunt, and Toothless chuffed in agreement again.

"Yo, what, it's give-girl-advice day? In that case, you can go help Mildew get his fourth wife," he replied in annoyance, shrugging Snotlout's arm off.

"Did I hear 'girl advice?'" Thuggory said, and once again, a large, beefy arm was thrown over his shoulder. His stump gave another twinge, this time sharper, as he stumbled slightly, and Hiccup sighed impatiently. Thuggory ignored it completely, and Snotlout folded his

arms and leaned on the table beside them. "I can give the professional, experienced opinion."

"Ung," Snotlout said, and Hiccup huffed and pushed Thuggory off too.

"Look, we have to change and get out there," he said, finally losing his patience when he saw the other two men glaring at each other. He un-slung his friend's stubborn arm and walked determinedly towards the door, ignoring their protests. "Thug, you have half an hour! If you're not next to the chief's hall by that time, I'm leaving you behind!"

He ignored the other heir's whining in favour of walking towards his hall, Toothless following behind. But by the time he had arrived at the bottom of the stairs, he was doing everything he could not to limp, and Toothless began nosing his leg and crooning.

"It's nothing, bud. Give me a lift, ok?" Sitting on Toothless's saddle was a relief, and he prepared to fly off before he spotted Brunhilda. He called her to him with an ahoy. "Hi! Listen, I've asked Astrid to come with me on a rescue mission - can you do her a favour and start on the remaining preparations for the guests' halls? I'll give her a hand when she comes back, too, but I really need a nadder on the team, and â€œ!" he shrugged. "I think she'll enjoy it."

"That she will," Brunhilda laughed. "Strange ideas for a date you have, between dragon races and rescue missions." Hiccup shifted uncomfortably at her assumption. Why was everyone so insistent on interpreting everything he did for Astrid romantically? Sure, it was true, but â€œ! oh Asgard, was it that obvious?

He took off, his chest in turmoil. So Astrid saw it too and â€œ! well, obviously, she must know. He'd never been very subtle about his stuttering and blushing and acting like a fool. It left his chest roiling uncomfortably to think that she knew of his feelings for her, but was behaving so undecided. It didn't bode well at all.

He escaped behind his curtain as soon as he entered the hall, because the noises upstairs indicated that she was still in her room. Toothless followed him in, tail swishing.

"Yes, that really helps give me privacy," he said sarcastically as the dragon's big body lifted the curtain where his hindfin and tail exited the small area completely. Toothless gave him a nonplussed look that clearly said he didn't care, then pointedly glanced down at his prosthetic, shifting his eyes back to nail him with a meaningful look. "Yeah, yeah, I'm on itâ€œ!"

He sat on the bed, first throwing off his fur cape and tunic just to annoy his friend, who gave a growl. Then he raised the rolled up trouser pant and undid the knots holding his prosthetic to his upper calf. It was always sweet relief, but this time, as he massaged the slightly red skin, he bit his lip when the woollen sock shifted, and he realised there was a damp spot.

The sock came off tentatively, and he winced when he saw that he'd managed to give himself a blister on the side of his stump, and then proceeded to also burst it.

"Aw, just great," he huffed, pushing Toothless's snout away as the dragon tried to sniff it. "It's ok, bud, nothing big. My fault for jittering about in the Hall." he undid his trousers and pushed them off, his under-linen hanging on by a hair as he reached over to the shelving that had been installed by his bed, pulling his riding clothes and leather armour down onto the bed by scooting sideways on his bum.

"Hiccup?" came Astrid's tentative voice outside his curtain. He yelped and lost his precarious perch on the edge of the bed as he reached for the last, elusive shoulder plate, falling to the ground with a curse and a laughing dragon. "Hiccup!"

Before he could stop her, Astrid walked in, and he blinked up at her from the ground. She froze when she saw his state of undress, then folded her arms and snorted.

"You fell off your bed, didn't you?" she said with an amused smirk. She was back in her armour, knee-caps on her leggings, high boots and furs. He blinked up at her as she stood over him, smirking, seemingly completely unaffected by the fact that he was practically naked. He felt like a child amusing a parent, prone on the floor. A child, looking up at Freya.

His chest gave a heave and a twist. Ever since he'd woken, Astrid had been tending to his wounds, his clothing, his food, as if he were an invalid or a child, who needed taking care of. Even her mother had said as much: Astrid enjoyed taking care of him. A new feeling bloomed in his chest; anger. Anger and pain and a little bit of resentment.

She knew he loved her. She knew; she must know. Everyone seemed to know, everyone seemed to think it was so bloody obvious that a half-wit terror would see it right away. Astrid was smart, so obviously, obviously, she knew. And yet she never expressed interest, or embarrassment, or anything that would indicateâ€|

"I'm fine," he said, looking away, grabbing a shelf and heaving himself all the way to his feet. She reached for him, but he manoeuvred away using his arm, then reached for Toothless, who also lent himself as an impromptu crutch. "Thanks, Astrid. Listen, can you see that the others are meeting outside our Hall? I've told Thuggory, but the others left before I could get the word out. We're leaving in half an hour, can you please let the others know?"

"I will but, will you be-"

"Fine, I'll be perfectly fine." He couldn't seem to get himself to look at her, and instead sat down, pulled the wool over his head, tying the neck laces shut and busying himself with his trousers. "I've been dressing myself on my own since I was three, so this shouldn't be too hard."

He hated the bitterness in his voice. He hated how now she must know that he felt like a tiny, invalid child. So he rolled his shoulders and made himself look at her with as strong an expression as he could manage. The amusement had vanished from her face and she blinked at him. At least, she didn't find him ridiculous anymore.

"Will you inform the others? Please," he said, straight-backed.

Astrid's mouth twitched into a tentative, confused smile. Brunhilda had also said that Astrid was confused with him; of course she'd be confused. She saw Hiccup, who she was supposed to marry - accident prone, silly-boy Hiccup who falls off his bed when reaching for something. Someone cute, like Åttta, to be smiled at indulgently when he made a mess; and she was supposed to marry him.

Well, it was quite enough of that. With some help from Toothless, he stood up and drew his leather trousers up quickly, feeling slightly self-conscious with the feeling of her eyes on him. He swallowed and looked up at her expectantly. The fact that it took her a moment to stop looking at his behind worriedly made his cheek twitch and colour, and when she realised he was looking at her, she ducked her head and accepted his task, leaving the hall quickly. Too quickly.

He rolled his shoulders, his heart beating wildly as he sat down again, the feeling of humiliation and disappointment pulsing through him. Dipping two fingers in the honey ointment he still used for the stitches on his stump and rubbing them onto the blister with a wince. He didn't have time to go to Goethi with this, and he sure wasn't going to give Astrid something else to 'take care of him' with. He'd go to the healer later. With a sigh, he turned to the sure-fire way he'd learned from experience to keep wounds clean.

Toothless scrunched his nose and growled at the bottle of vinegar, knowing what it meant.

"Hey, it's ok bud. It's only a scratch, but we have to keeping it from becoming something worse. Look." he propped his stump on his knee. The blister was on the in-step, so it showed up, shiny and pink as it flared up towards his knee. It wasn't too big, but it was definitely inconvenient. "It'll go in a bit."

With a resigned sigh, he threw the soiled sock he'd been wearing into his shelf, where he planned to wash it himself. He took a new one up, dribbled the transparent liquid into the edge of the whole sock, and then hesitated for a moment. This was not going to be pleasant. With a clench of his jaw, he wrenched the sock on, and then he threw his head back with a closed-mouthed groan. The blister flared for a moment like a hot coal had been pressed to his skin, then it fell into a dull throb. It stole his breath away, and it took him a moment to get his gasps under control. Toothless whined in sympathy, glaring at the bottle of vinegar like it had killed his parents.

"It's alright, bud, it's necessary, you know that. I don't have strong, tough skin like you," he chuckled, earning a grumbling agreement. He quickly finished putting his armour on, tying his prosthetic on last and standing, ignoring the dull throbbing through habit - it wasn't too long ago that the whole stitched wound throbbed in the same way. And he had things to do and a mission to accomplish.

He stretched, gathering some supplies for what was probably a journey that would last a whole day, and then added some more, in case they got stuck somewhere, or Astrid needed some more supplies. Then he added a whole extra ration of supplies, in case she didn't have time to gather her own.

He tied to lot to Toothless's saddle and smiled at him. "You know,

this is actually great. It's been a while since we had time to fly for more than a half-hour, isn't it?"

Toothless gave a smirk and shook himself excitedly with a grunt of agreement, crest flaps rising in sheer elation. Hiccup laughed.

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to it too, bud. And there's going be all the other dragons. But," he sighed. "We're heading out on a mission. We have be at least a little responsible." Toothless looked incredulous for a second. "No, I'm serious, Hel, I have to give the good example, seeing as I'm leading this mission, and hey, that's it!" He looked at Toothless excitedly, grinning. "I just have to remind her that even without a leg, I'm still a kick-ass dragon rider, and that I can fight when I'm with you, at least. And that I'm not bad at giving instructions." Toothless blinked at him before narrowing his pupils. "Come on, bud, I have to make her stop thinking of me like some sort of idiot." Toothless's lids came down half-way to say 'good luck with that'. "Thank you, for the vote of confidence, but I'm at least going to try. I'll show her that I'm a great dragon rider, and I'm ok at leading. And maybe she'll stop looking at me like that idiot kid who falls on his face all the time, and start looking at me like husband material."

Toothless gave him a gummy smile of shining support. Hiccup chuckled and gave him a brief hug before moving out.

"Thanks, bud."

=0=

Cami whooped, pulling on the reins and making Sting do loop-de-loops in the sky. The day was a beautiful, clear one, blue sky peeking through fluffy white clouds. The air was freezing just the way she liked it, and it filled her lungs and tasted like fresh water from a spring. Her loose hair trailed behind her, whipping about into untamable knots she would enjoy displaying in the hall later.

Hopefully, someone would offer to comb it out for her. Or explode the knots out of her hair with the gunpowder! She'd be interested in either one, as long as she could get to do the same to him.

"Are we on course, Dogsbreath?" Hiccup called out, twisting in his saddle. Cami smirked at him when she noticed - even with the helmet on - that his eyes were caught by Astrid riding her nadder. He was going to be soooo much fun to tease later.

"Dead on," Dogsbreath replied, consulting his map and compass before giving his reply. Ung, that guy had a stick so far up his ass that he was going to start choking on it soon, though if she was going to be honest, at least if was good to have one reliably boring person. And she was also glad that Hiccup was mad at him; in fact, she was mad at him. What did he mean by telling his dad the secrets Hiccup had shared with them! She wasn't stupid: she knew that she should have told her mother who Cattongue was, but fuck that! If her mother wasn't smart enough to know, it was her fault. And there was no other way that the UglyThug chief could have made all those sleazy little insinuations without Dogsbreath spilling the eggs. And he deserved a kick in the balls for it. They were friends first, heirs second.

Until the day they were chiefs, their friends could afford to come first, and he was a dick-hole for having forgotten that.

She gave the gronkle rider a smirk. Retribution; no time like the present.

"What you say, girl," she whispered to her changewing, who recognised the tone and shuddered excitedly. Oooh, yeah. Her dragon was awesome and knew exactly how to piss people off. "Up for some mischief?"
Sting gave a cackle of agreement. Cami just nodded towards Dogsbreath, and Sting gave a throaty laugh, lifted her tail and peed all over him.

"Ock!" the UglyThug and the gronkle veered out of the way, shouting expletives her way - the dragon too, if that growling meant anything - that would make her grandmother's hair turn green in its grave. She just laughed uproariously.

"What, you have a leaky mouth, and my dragon has a leaky hind!" she said, not bothering to hide the reason behind his cruel and unusual washing. "I'd say it's equal enough!"

"Stuff it, Bogger!" he replied, shaking a fist at her and holding up his dripping map, which just made her laugh, because now that piece of parchment was going to smell for days and make whatever he kept it in smell for months, and maps were too valuable to throw away. Aaah, her dragon was a genius, and she petted Sting fondly.

"Maaake me! It's not like you can, on that slow-ass dragon!" Cami replied with a taunt, directing Sting to fly around the gronkle in quick loops just to make a point, and the changewing dangled a tongue at the rock dragon, earning an annoyed growl. "You couldn't catch me in a million years, not unless you move on fart propulsion!"

Gasda, her companion from Bog and her mother's top general, snickered from her nightmare. Astrid was biting her lip, and Thuggory was laughing his ass off, while his cousin on the young timberjack tried to keep a straight face out of politeness - bah, screw politeness. She was sure Toothless was laughing his head off- wait, where was he?

A shadow loomed over them, and suddenly Cami winced as she looked back, and found Toothless, wings outstretched to their full length and looking as threatening as he could get. But he was nothing in comparison to how intimidating the ticked-off Hiccup looked on his back, arms folded and eyes calm and solid.

Sometimes she could swear they were related; hell, Hiccup was giving her the look, and he looked just like her mother right now. Ung.

Not that she was intimidated. She was a Bog Burglar.

"What, think you can beat me, little man?" she asked, drawling tauntingly. "Maybe you could outrun me when we were kids, but not anymore! Sting will beat you and your tooth-pick any day!"

Toothless gave an indignant screech.

"Not much fun when you're the one being teased, eh night bird!" Thuggory called. Toothless lowered his eyelids, and ignoring Hiccup's 'ooooh, boy', spat a very tiny fireball at Thuggory. Fanghorn, of course, did not appreciate this and growled.

"Everyone!" Hiccup said, exasperation in his tone. "Can we please concentrate. The ships from Hopeless may already be in danger; we don't have time to fool around!"

"All the more reason to hurry it up!!" Cami crowed triumphantly, and Sting didn't wait an instant to shoot ahead.

"Oh for the love of â€¢ Astrid!"

Cami heard vague snatches asking about direction, and then suddenly, the race was on. Sting soon lost her advantage, because Toothless was simply too fast. However, there was one other surprise Cami certainly wasn't expecting, but who she very much didn't mind.

"Cami! Cut it out!" Astrid called, flanking her right side when Hiccup took her left.

"Don't think you can beat me, axe-girl?" she called out, and she was thrilled to see the other girl's eyes sharpen.

"Stormfly and I can beat you in our sleep! But we're on a mission, and -"

"Prove it!" Cami said, laughing hoarsely from the wind. "See that sea-stack over there? It's on the way. Last one there has to wash Gobber's skivvies!" Sting roared as she urged her forward and the dragon complied right away, twirling upside-down for a thrill. She spotted Toothless giving Hiccup a pleading look, and knew right away she'd won that argument. Hiccup would never be able to say no to that look.

"You're damn on!" Astrid's fierce voice followed her, and Cami felt her grin stretch her face painfully. She laughed as evilly as she could as she swerved and evaded, Sting disappearing and reappearing around the other two dragons and riders just at the right moment to make them yelp or curse her. She kept herself flattened against the saddle, and the rest of her dragon's body covered her to make her invisible as well.

"That's how you want to play, huh!" Astrid called, "Fine! Stormfly, let's show her what we're made of!"

The blue nadder squaked, and suddenly shot out in front.

"Not a chance!" Hiccup laughed, and he quickly lay down on Toothless' back completely, pulled his levers up and they shot off like a bat out of helheim.

"Oi!" Cami screamed after them, and Sting flapped her wings in one big gust and off they went, zigging and zagging across the water top, taking a bite out of the air next to Toothless's tail and laughing wickedly when he tried to slap her in the face with it, and then turning on the nadder.

Who was ready for her with a purposefully ill-aimed shot of spines

that made her go wide, and fall behind.

"You are so on woman!" she called to the laughing girl, who gave a mock apology that was obviously meant to rile her up. "Forget the man, it's me and you!"

"Hey!"

Cami ignored him and shot off after Astrid, who looped Stormfly in the sky in a show of flying strength and agility, making a rude gesture with her hand as a 'bring it on!"

With a shout, Cami urged Sting on, and the changewing was soon neck-to-neck with the nadder, both girls standing in their saddles and shouting encouragements to their dragons as they headed for the row of free-standing rocks that were coming closer and closer at alarming speed. She glanced to the side, and Astrid gave her a competitive grin, which she returned. "Nice axe, by the way," she said leadingly, trying to distract her opponent. "That's totally Brisinga2. Saw it in his sketchbook once, all drawn out and measured, it was supposed to go to this one girl from his island â€| oh yeaah, to you. He had such a crush on you it was pathetic!"

Astrid's grip on Stormfly faltered and she fell back an inch, but then she gave a shout and shot forward even more strongly,

"Look at the back of my dragon! It's less full of shit than your mouth!" she laughed back, her voice carrying on the wind. Cami answered with various opinions on shit and Astrid's bloodline, and then had to duck more spine-shots as a result. Sting liked it none-too-much and spat a gob of acid to the nadder's right, causing Astrid to loop upwards and come back down at her in the opposite direction to their finish line.

"Haha!" Cami crowed at her, and Stormfly chomped at the air under Sting's wing in bluster as she caught up.

"Don't call Hiccup pathetic!" Astrid called at her angrily.

"That's what you got from all that?" she laughed. "Girl, you are lost! If you want him, go get him! He's right there waiting for you, but he won't wait forever!"

"Put your wings where your mouth is!" Astrid answered, looked fiery as her eyes shone and she flattened herself against Stormfly. The nadder tucked her feet in, and they were off again, Cami giving merry chase.

The nadder still touched down onto the sea-stack first, and Cami landed awaiting jeers and goodnatured insults, which she returned full force, laughing and grinning for all she was worth.

"Nice of you both to show up."

Both girls jumped and turned around in their saddles to find Hiccup and Toothless on a higher portion of the sea-stack, buffing his nails and looking non-plussed. Fuck that man, he was spending too much time with Toothless because he was wearing his dragon's smug expression.

"You rotten sea-slug!" Cami laughed up at him. "Damn you and your night fury!"

Toothless landed beside them, and Hiccup, who had partially removed his mask and was resting it on the top of his head as a viser, gave them both a smug grin.

"I think you'll find that Toothless and I are certainly no kind of slugs in this situation, slow pokes."

"Did you hear that!" Cami said to Astrid in mock outrage. "I'm not letting this slide, are you?"

"Certainly not!" Astrid laughed, standing on Stormfly's saddle and throwing herself down onto the ground. After a few good chin-scratches, Toothless was a kicking puddle in her hands, Hiccup thrown clean off onto the ground, and Cami laughed, lording it over him with Astrid. "Try to outfly us now on blubber-legs here!"

"She totally has you tied around her little finger," Cami jeered, and it was a pleasure to see his already flushed face light up with more colour. The race had been as exhilarating for him too, and his hair was sticking around his face with sweat, the ends looking a shade red darker than the rest of his shaggy mop. And boy, the way he was looking at Astrid play with his dragon was smoking hot. She could bet he wished Astrid were playing with his other dragon. "Yup, you're a done man," she said in a lower voice, urging Sting's long neck forward so she was hovering next to his shoulder. "You may as well throw the towel and join Thuggory in the old men category."

"Huh," he replied. "You'll get there yourself." And she grinned evilly that he didn't deny anything. "But maybe once you're done playing on Berk, you can finally do your duty as future Bog chief and go find someone to make daughters with."

"Oi!" she said, feeling slightly offended. "Who said I'm playing on Berk?" He ignored her, signalling to the other riders who were approaching. Her chest grew heavy as she bit her lip. What? Was that why her last two letters went unanswered? Did Tuff think that? She was a Bog woman, sure, but she didn't play around with things like this. Bog heirs only got one chance.

The other riders finally caught up with them, landing on their sea-stack or another nearby. Hiccup hopped with a few agile leaps, never mind his leg, onto a higher rock and whipped out his spy glass, declaring that he could see the ships, that they should approach cautiously and attack the sea dragons ("They are definitely giving them problems- damn, there goes the mast!") so as not to incur in friendly fire, and then escort the ships back, by towing them if necessary.

"Everyone clear?" he asked, and he got a chorus of 'ayes'. Cami noticed Astrid's eyes shining up at him, and the Bog heir scowled at them all, flying off in formation to do her duty.

The rest went well; they got rid of the sea dragons - though to be honest, there was one hilarious moment when Fanghorn decided he liked dragons more than humans and almost hightailed it after the

other Thunderdrums, and Cami got to tell him that it was probably his stink that did it. It was hilarious to watch the flabbergasted expressions of the people on the ships too - they should do this whole 'not tell people about dragons and then ride in to save them' thing more often.

Though last time with the Red Death was more fun. She got to make things explode with Tuffnut last time.

Her mood fouled again. What did Hiccup mean, 'done playing'?

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1 As I said in the AN of my preview chapter, the Vikings have anachronism gunpowder here because Mildew blew the armoury up with it in 'In dragons we trust'. And after all, if you've looked up pinky swearing ...

2 Brisinda, the name of Astrid's axe, is the name of the beautiful necklace Freya wore. This is another play on Astrid's name, and a hint to a future nickname she will gain, soon. No, not 'milady', another one.

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Just to make it very clear here; Hiccup was actually joking. Or maybe he was hoping Cami wasn't serious about Tuffnut after all â€| for her sake. And Hiccup's image of himself here is not the only thing getting in his and Astrid's way. There are some cultural issues that are going to be exposed and dealt with.

9. Thundering Crash

Watch the epithet â€|

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><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 7 - Thundering Crash_

**When a tree falls it resounds with a thundering crash; and yet a whole forest grows in silence.**

â€• _**Jocelyn Murray**_

Thuggory was stretching, chatting amicably with the best friend who he'd missed terribly in the last months. They'd only met a few times in their childhoods, always on the Things when their parents brought their whole families along. When Hiccup's mother had gone, Stoick had stopped bringing the boy with him after a while as there was no one to watch him during the talks, and so their relationship had been cut short. That is to say, Hiccup had been with him, one last time; but then Cami had had one of her crazy ideas, buildings

had gone up in flames, beards had been seared off, and Hiccup had sighed and stepped forward to take the blame for all of them, cringing from his father's eyes the whole time. Thuggory had never known he could admire someone as he did the skinny twelve-year-old that day. Then, when he'd discovered who 'Cat Tongue' really was, he'd been overjoyed to have his friend back, and since he was a smashing smith, he had no problem convincing everyone to let him stay on Freezing for months at a time. It had been glorious - though he did wish he could have managed to make him get drunk more than that one time - but it had spoiled him. Now he was pining for Hiccup time, and Heather even got jealous sometimes.

What can you do? A bro was a bro. Hiccup was his battle brother, nothing in the world could change that.

They'd been exchanging quiet words - Hiccup was listening to news of Heather's pregnancy, and although Thuggory was embellishing the little that had happened to date as much as he could, and Hiccup probably knew it, the smile on his face wasn't any less wide.

"WHAT?!"

Hiccup and Thuggory stopped short, just at the door of the great hall. What they saw in front of them was not very encouraging for the start of the official talks. Cami was standing in the middle of the room, hair a-tangle despite the hours that had elapsed since their wild ride to the skies which should have been used to change into their formal clothes - which everyone else had. The Bog heir's posture was rigid as a steel pole, her fists clenched at her sides and her eyes blazing even wilder than her blonde mop.

"What do you mean," she hissed, "Tuffnut's intended?"

The barmaid swallowed hard, cringing away, but she stood up straighter and hugged the wine jug to herself as if it could protect her from the furious Bog woman.

"I mean exactly what I said. Tuffnut's intended bride," she said back angrily, her cheeks going slightly red to match her hair. Thuggory winced as Cami's hands went to her sword hilts and she started breathing heavily, her chin jutting out in an almost murderous angle.

"Oh boy," Hiccup said beside him in an anxious voice that heralded disaster. With a bitten lip, Hiccup signalled first to Snotlout, then to Astrid.

"Lauga!" Snotlout said, taking the red-haired barmaid by the shoulders and turning her away bodily with very little effort - she was honestly a petite little thing, bird-like and short. Snotlout looked like a giant next to her, so carting her off was no problem.

Cami, on the other handâ€¦

"I'll kill her," she hissed. "I'll open her gut while she breathes and make her wear her entrails as a bridal crown!"

"Cami, not here," Hiccup hissed back, obviously trying not to wince

as her elbow dug into his belly. Astrid did not appreciate her man's rough treatment, apparently, and grabbed her by the arm, twisting it and frog-marching her out. "Our hall," he called after her. Hiccup looked back at Stoick, who nodded, and the shot out after them. Thuggory was about to follow when Dogsbreath walked up to him.

"It seems like a crises has happened," he said in a low voice. "Does Hiccup need any help?"

"No," Thuggory said at once, a frown slamming down on his face before he could stop it. "Certainly not from blabber-mouths."

Dogsbreath's normally blank faced twitched. "Lookâ€|"

"No, there's nothing to look at," Thuggory replied, his attention switching between the fellow heir in front of him the the door to the Hall. "Hiccup trusted you, like he trusted us, and you went and told your dad at the first chance you got?" He shook his head, his anger suddenly rooting him to the spot despite the urgency he felt to follow his battle brother and sister. "And I introduced you two! No offense, Dogsbreath, but I'm really glad I haven't told you anything important. Ever. And by Forseti, that's a promise."

"But," Thuggory felt momentarily guilty at Dogsbreath's genuinely confused and hurt expression; for someone who was usually so careful and reserved in putting his features about his face blankly, there was something to be said about the impact of a twisted mouth and eyebrow. "We are heirs â€| doesn't our first duty come to our chief and our people?"

"Within reason, Dogsbreath," he replied, folding his arms. "If one of your allies - your friends - confides a secret with you in an unofficial manner, that remains a secret. If a friend's in need, you help out. Unless your tribe or your chief are in danger of being smoked out of house, home or life, you don't just go blab. We're not chiefs yet, we can afford some cordiality between us and - Hel! - I'm sure there's more than enough informal agreements between the chiefs. You'll make a fine mess of it, if you bring every single tiny thing in front of a room full of people all with their own agendas!"

Dogsbreath bit his lip, still looking promisingly and openly confused.

"I have to go," he nodded towards the door, already turning to leave. "Family business."

He didn't look back to see how that particular punch landed, but he sure hoped it landed somewhere tender and painful.

He'd obviously lost them by the time he rushed through the Hall doors, and it took more than a little asking in order to be pointed towards the forest by an endearingly smiling man with a bucket on his head. Obviously, Hiccup's hall had possibly been in danger of being destroyed, so that plan had changed. It was encouraging that they had not taken the dragons.

By the time he arrived - following their voices among the trees - Cami's face was botched red, and her eyes were redder. Thuggory didn't dare think what could have reduced the normally indomitable

woman to this point, but he wasn't going to just stand by.

"We'll look into it, Cami, I promise," Hiccup was saying, holding the Bog Woman by the shoulders. The look she had in her eyes was wild - wilder than usual - and Thuggory almost hesitated to step forward, but he simply couldn't not...

"What can I do?" he said as he broke the line of trees. Cami turned her wild eyes on him, too, and for a second he thought she would either attack him or burst out into â€œ whatever had made her eyes so red again. Then Astrid's hand landed on the other woman's shoulder, and Cami snapped to her.

"Let's go kill trees," Astrid said with resolute severity - not as warning or restraint, but almost as if to say that the Berk woman was on her side. Thuggory's heart twisted - of course they were on her side. What on earth was happening?

"Thuggory," Hiccup said, just as seriously as he carefully let go of Cami's shoulders and let Astrid take over, tucking the shorter girl into her side as she brought a beautiful new axe out and clanged the head against Cami's double swords. A moment of silent communication passed between Hiccup and Astrid before the Hooligan heir ripped his eyes to Thuggory again. "I need your help."

"Don't you go tell him!" Cami suddenly snapped, turning and trying to twist out of Astrid's grip. The taller blonde held on.

"Why not?" he asked, hurt and offended. "If I can help, I will."

"You will," Hiccup said, "but story time is going to have to come later. Cami can tell you herself when she's not that upset. Enough to say for now that she has good reason to be." Hiccup looked at Cami again "And we'll help her." Thuggory nodded emphatically. He'd be damned to wash Hel's rotting teeth for eternity before he left them in a moment of obvious need.

"What do you need me to do?"

"The ships from Hopeless are here, and the ones from TrollGuts tribe have been spotted on the horizon. They planned on starting the talks this morning, but I need you to go in there and make a fuss about how your wife is not here, and it is not fair that all the other heirs have theirâ€œ spouses or future spouses thereâ€œ" for some reason, Hiccup lowered his voice at the last bit, throwing a worried look towards the women. Cami was glaring daggers at him, and Astrid's grip on her had gone white-knuckled. "Say that in the name of fairness, the other ships from Freezing before the official talks can begin. Try to delay as much as possible, and if they ask where we are â€œ say that you saw us go down to the docks, to greet TrollGuts ships."

"If they follow down there, and there's no one?"

"I'll be down there in a moment." He gave Astrid a fleeting look, almost begging. She gave a sullen nod and Hiccup looked relieved. "Cami can have the privacy of the woods with Astrid. I'll just say that â€œ thatâ€œ Cami went up to give Astrid a hand with the preparations. Because it's not fair for great warrior women like her

to suffer on her own with horridly boring domestic chores."

Thuggory didn't know how he did, but Hiccup surprised him every time. Astrid gave him a look Thuggory was familiar with - fond and exasperated - while Cami actually snorted wetly and consented with a reluctant nod.

"The things are done," Astrid said, her voice reflecting her eyes. "So that's us covered. Go; you're intruding on 'great warrior woman time' here."

"Yeah," Cami said, none of her usual fire in her tone. "Go 'way."

Thuggory grimaced, looking at Hiccup, who slapped his arm.

"Go the the Hall, Thug. Make some diversion, please. Stall. I'm going to the docks right away." One last look at Astrid. "We need to keep this quiet as long as we can. I'm going through the books."

"You'll tell me, right?" he asked the clearing in general and Cami in particular even as he was moving away.

"Yeah, just not now," she replied, rubbing her eye with the heel of her hand, tapping her sword in the other one. She leaned, subtly, into Astrid, and the taller girl gave her a worried look. "I've got trees to kill with my sister here, right now."

They nodded and turned. "Oh, and Hiccup?" They both turned again to find Astrid looking at Hiccup meaningfully. "Send Ruff up. And my mum, if you can find her." Cami made to protest. "Trust me."

Hiccup nodded. "Always," he replied, though Thuggory was sure he knew the last request wasn't aimed at him. He turned away before he could see Astrid's eyes lingering on him.

"Is it bad?" he asked the moment they were out of earshot. He knew from Hiccup's frown that it was - and it was utterly terrifying to see Cami's eyes look like that - but a part of him simply couldn't rest. He wished his dear sharp-minded wife was there. Then again â€¦

"It can be. It doesn't have to be." Hiccup said, and Thuggory nodded.

Then again, Hiccup was obviously already thinking about it, if his steady eyes and churning jaw said anything. Thuggory couldn't help but feel slightly odd; here was a man who was younger than him, admittedly still slightly scrawny by Viking standards, though he was tall. And yet he was handling this situation like a chief already, while Thuggory was feeling way out of his dept. He wouldn't have been able to handle Cami like that, whatever was wrong with her, and he knew it.

It made Thuggory very, very glad to have backup like Hiccup. And he'd be damned before he let down his battle brother.

"I'll keep them as much as I can. Initiate a full-blown fight if I have to," Thuggory assured him as they broke the trees into the village grounds.

"No wars, you hear?" Hiccup said, only half joking, eyes already flitting about and looking for the two women Astrid had requested.

"It will be an epic battle of well-aimed chicken legs," Thuggory said, receiving a pat on the shoulder as they went their separate ways.

He only hoped that, whatever this was, it wasn't as bad as to start anything with well-aimed spears.

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Fishlegs was more than a little perplexed at Hiccup's request earlier, but he couldn't say that he minded. With the construction of the temporary halls for the visitors over, their work had lulled, and while he did enjoy time at home, Ruffnut sometimes couldn't resist the urge to hog-tie him to a post to keep him from getting in her way while she violently beat the domestic chores into their rightful place.

The room of records was at the back of the hall, and Hiccup had begged his father permission to let him look for something there. Hiccup had vouched for his trustworthiness ("Dad, he's not 'the wise' for nothing") and it made Fishlegs feel on top of the world. It wasn't like he could hear much of what was going on in the hall from the back room anyway, even with some of the preliminary talks going on again - which everyone had been tacitly informed to keep their pie-hole shut about when the other tribes arrived. Fishlegs was happy that Mildew kept away from the main village when a Thing or Snoggletog or any other happy celebration took place, because he sure as heck wouldn't have kept his mouth shut, and there would have been a war. He'd been there only a few days ago, bartering for supplies, growling at everyone.

Because Fishlegs was far from stupid, and he knew that the chiefs weren't tiptoeing because they were worried about the other tribes' feelings.

But right now, the booming, indistinct words from the Hall were secondary in his attention to the clear-cut, black-on-white words in front of him. Hiccup had instructed him to look into the Viking law of the allied clans, and he'd surprised him when he told him to look for certain article numbers off the top of his head, and then Fishlegs had found them to be relevant to one another. Hiccup never stopped surprising him.

Still, he thought as he turned the pages of the fifth tome, taking notes on some scrap parchment, the subject of these searches were worrying, and didn't bode well at all for Hiccup and Astrid's happiness. There were just too many worrying signs already that their relationship was strained, but this just proved it; if Hiccup was looking into these things, then there was a serious case of worry-worthy events set on the verge of taking place.

Fishlegs continued taking down notes, copying entire sentences when they were relevant, and frowning at the parchment. All of this tended towards the same thing, the same general subject, and each one of the articles Hiccup had pointed out (with request to look out for any

other that he may have missed) dealt with the same subject.

He was going to have to talk to Ruffnut, ASAP. His first instinct was also to talk to Snotlout - he'd taken a really good guarding role in Hiccup's life recently, and it had done him well. But Snotlout also had a big mouth, and there was danger in that. That Hiccup had asked him to do this during meetings, so no one could interrupt him and see what he was doing, made this particular search private - and maybe dangerous. Well, it was certainly dangerous to a certain blonde friend of theirs if it was uncovered. Everything about her status in the village would put in question, and she could be left with nothing but the clothes on her back and her shield on the wall.

And what was Hiccup thinking anyway, Fishlegs huffed, taking his pipe and the smoking weed out of his pocket and holding it to his candle. He was pretty serious when he asked Fishlegs yesterday, though, after he literally dragged Ruff away to tell her to go to talk to Astrid in the woods. It was odd but not worrying at the time - Hiccup had said something about Astrid needing help to de-forest all of Berk with the Bog heir - but now that took on a new light.

Why was Hiccup sending women up to deal with Astrid killing trees, and asking Fishlegs to look into all â€œ all this material unless they'd fought? Astrid hadn't looked upset this morning, but then Astrid was a warrior - she could put her fighter face on and deal with it. Hiccup had looked upset. In factâ€œ

Fishlegs stood, stifling a moan as he realised how stiff he'd become, and moved towards the curtain separating the small records' room from the main area of the Great Hall. He moved the leather curtain slightly and spotted Hiccup right away. His brown hair had gone considerably lighter since he'd returned, hues of red and blond traversing the now-hazel strands as the light from the fire shone on it. He was sitting up straight, back tense and upright, eyes narrowed as he listened attentively, and left leg jiggling nervously under the table. Astrid, on his other side, was conspicuously absent.

Fishlegs was about to turn away when someone banged on the table, making him jump and almost swallow his pipe. He smoked some of the new weed they'd brought from across the waters. A lot of the men had started smoking the dragon-nip long grass after Hiccup had revealed it's properties and effects on dragons, and it had a nice, mellowing effect on men too. But this new black stuff tasted better.

He tried to distract himself with the weed - he honestly did - but even the echo-y acoustic of the room could not stop him from cringing at the loud booming voice of Stoick the Vast sounding angrier than he'd been in many, many years.

"You take that accusation back," he said in a dangerous hiss. "Or the treaty between our people is null and void!"

Fishlegs had to cover his mouth with his fist, then fumble to stop his lit pipe from clattering to the ground. That was not a threat Stoick would do just â€œ just like that!

And this was the first day that the talks had officially started.

"It's true!" a man Fishlegs didn't recognise said, crossing his arms. By his armour colour and the type of fur he wore, he was from the UglyThug tribe. "It really is a chokehold that Berk will have if all the dragon training happens here."

"What say you to this accusation, Wolftooth? Your General is speaking out of turn, and you are letting him proceed. Am I to understand that you are behind him?"

"Slightly, but not completely," A man to the left said, and Fishlegs tried to angle himself to see, but could not. The tone of the man was placid, however, and betrayed nothing to neither the room nor Fishlegs' ears. This seemed to irritate about 80% of the people present, and Stoick went a shade of puce that he'd never seen before, even when the twins had set a portion of the forest alight to celebrate and protest Ruff's engagement to him. Fishlegs winced as he looked back at the documents he was researching - Hiccup was not going to protest that overtly, it would seem.

"Then you're a cowardly dog, Wolftooth," the chief of the Bogs said in a voice that was none-too-gentle. "The arrangement that is being offered will be beneficial to all the tribes. I thought this discussion was concluded the moment the proposal was made, because it was ideal."

Fishlegs felt a shiver go down his back as he felt the atmosphere in the room suddenly become cutthroat. His eyes meandered over to Hiccup, who was sitting there silently and stony faced. The only sign of nervousness he was showing was his jiggling leg, and that was invisible to anyone in the room who wasn't at the angle Fishlegs was. Still, his friend looked remarkably in control, and from his eyes he could see that he was thinking very hard - he sort of looked like he did during the battle of the Red Death.

"You did not let me finish," the chief of the UglyThugs said, still in his jarringly calm voice.

"Then finish and hurry up about it," another man said, also invisible to Fishlegs' eyes; but he knew that it was Thuggory's father from the slight slur. "We're with Stoick on this one, and I'm beginning to lose my patience."

"Very well. All I meant is - and I'm sure my General meant the same - is that it will be a strain upon Berk's resources. We should help there."

Ah, Fishlegs felt the room almost breathe a sigh of relief. Obviously, the only ones who weren't happy about this were the UglyThugs. Because one of their generals had said something rather stupid, they were going to have divide their resources to make up for it.

"I expect an apology from your General," Stoick said, still standing.

"Of course. Go on, Sockpaste. Please address the meeting now, with an apology."

"I do apologise. I was only voicing a concern." Fishlegs still couldn't see the man, but he sounded sheepish. Stoick seemed to

relax, rolling his shoulder and sitting with a wave of his hand; again, the room breathed easier.

"You're young. You'll learn," Stoick said as a way of accepting his apology. Fishlegs sighed silently - my, he wasn't going to enjoy this when his father passed the seat on to him. He'd almost had three heart attacks!

"Does anyone else wish to vote against this solution?" Stoick said. "Bile, Footsore; do you find it satisfactory?"

"Well, I don't see why not," a man with a forked, braided beard said, stroking one braid with each hand. "Son?" He turned to a man beside him, who looked just like him twenty years younger, down to the shorter, blacker braids swinging from his chin.

"Eh," he replied with a shrug. "It'll benefit us. Help against Outcast attacks too. Those bastards have been getting bold since the dragon raids stopped."

"Aye, and it's good to know we owe it to you," his father replied, raising a keg.

"Thank you, Footsore." Stoick replied after he gave Hiccup a look, and Hiccup shook his head subtly. Why hadn't he answered?

"We may have a bit of a problem with that," the other man answer. Fishlegs moved slightly, angling himself to see. This other chief - obvious Bile, of the Hopeless tribe, was tall and somewhat thinner than the other men, but the two maces hanging from his back seemed to say he wasn't one you screwed around with, "I do not see a disadvantage with the dragons - We got a first-hand demonstration on how good they can be on your side." A nod towards Hiccup, who answered with a normal, bashful smile that pulled up a corner of Fishlegs' own face. "But Hopeless is tiny. We barely make enough to feed ourselves. We'd hardly be able to help Berk with supplies."

"Ah, that is true," Bertha said. "We know about your situation, Bile. As we put different numbers on the entries to Dragon Academy, we'll put different quantities on the help Berk gets. Hopeless only got two places - the help should reflect that."

"Fair's fair," Wolftooth said. "We're not really helping Berk, just feeding our own folk while they're here getting the free dragon lessons."

"Oh, Spit eats about as much as a bird anyway," Bile sighed, and he pulled a little boy out from behind him. The child, brown haired and blue eyed with a slightly scared look, barely made it up to the table. "Go on, introduce yourself," Bile ordered gruffly.

"H-Hi," the boy said. "I'm Spit, son of Bile, heir to the Slugsnot tribe of Hopeless." His voice was small and piping, and Fishlegs could only see him because the door to the record room was behind him. Had there been the table in the way, Fishlegs doubted he would have seen anything; the others around the table were probably only seeing his helmet.

Stoick gave a booming laugh. "Reminds me of my Hiccup, eh? But how

old is your boy?"

"Eight," Bile replied, somewhat ruffling his feather.

"Ah, good; Hiccup's put that age limit on the dragon training. Don't want children too young about them - they're still fire breathing beasts, and they need to be old enough to take orders."

Bile relaxed. Fishlegs looked around the room again, and couldn't help but notice that Berta was sitting at the table alone, while Hiccup was there. Fishlegs had also seen Thuggory and Dogsbreath go in, so it was strange that the bog heir and Astrid were not in attendance, especially since the two Trollguts men both had a woman beside them - presumably, their wives. It made him think of Ruff's hurry to go out this morning; perhaps the women were hatching something. Perhaps he could run for the hills.

The meeting began to turn towards the individual dragon breeds that could be found on the various islands, and questions began to be asked to Hiccup directly, who always answered through his father, and Fishlegs suddenly realised why - if Cami was absent, it would put the Bogs at a disadvantage. Heirs had already spoken in the meeting, so they were already allowed to speak, but Hiccup was showing respect and solidarity in blaring fire-signs to the entire meeting and making the Bog Burglars an even stronger ally with the Hooligans. Smart.

Fishlegs peeled himself away from the leather curtain, sitting his behind back down onto the stool to keep going over the legal books. If Hiccup was looking as impatient as his jiggling foot suggested, he might want these right after the meeting, and Fishlegs really didn't want to let him down. Hiccup's plans, apparently, had become a lot more strategic, and Fishlegs hoped that what he was looking at wasn't something Hiccup would regret later.

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Pieces of the puzzleâ€|

10. SkÃ¥l

Remember that epithet?

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><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

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><p>Chapter 8 â€" SkÃ¥l_ 1

**Celebration is a confrontation, giving attention to the transcendent meaning of one's actions.**

â€• _**Abraham Joshua Heschel**_

Every step up the Goethi's stairway was torture. He couldn't stop the

nervous jiggle in his leg during the meeting, not when the UglyThugs had been playing such strange tricks all the time, and not when he was so worried about the situation with Cami. He'd calm down for an instant, and realise that his thigh muscle was aching and that his stump was throbbing, or Toothless would nudge him, and he'd realise that his foot was hopping up and down again. He thanked the stars that Astrid had oiled and shined it for the sake of making him look presentable, because otherwise he would have driven everyone crazy with the squeaking.

But now he was paying for it. He was sure that the nail-head sized blister was as red as it could get without checking, and that he'd probably torn the edges wider. The vinegar in the sock felt clammy, and the area around the wound felt wetter than it should with just the healing liquid on it; he knew it was oozing again, and that was not a good sign.

He'd had pressure sores before. He knew that the best way to heal was to give them air, keep them clean and keep weight off them. Most of them had been in the most uncomfortable areas, too, seeing as the sores usually came from riding Toothless all day for days on end, so this pain was relatively minimal. Still, it was an irritation he could have done without.

He couldn't say he didn't have enough on his mind to distract him, because he seriously did. The situation with Cami was at the forefront of his mind, but there was also the rather unexpected, horrid surprise of the UglyThug generals all behaving in an almost overtly hostile manner. Just Madfoot behaving like that, and talking out of turn, would have been regrettable, but two? And without Wolftooth reacting before it could escalate to his father yelling and the other chiefs making veiled threats? He was going to have to re-evaluate his thoughts on that tribe. He'd been worried about â€œ actually, was still worried about them, as they were missing, but still. Wolftooth had given him a different impression every time he had visited, and now Hiccup began to believe that he'd been totally and utterly fooled. The chief of the UglyThugs had probably known who he was all along; Dogsbreath, too. They'd played him for a fool for trusting them, and now were using it against them at the Thing.

This sucked. He couldn't even trust Dogsbreath to find out what was going on for him, because he looked like he was in on it with the others. And without Dogsbreath, they had one less ally on their side to deal with Cami's situation; they had to keep it from getting out. They had to keep it from getting anywhere.

Thank Asgard for Astrid. She was a handmaiden of Freya, sent straight from the goddess' hall to help him. Never mind how frustrated she made him, or how mad he seemed to make her (apparently, he still couldn't get out of her bad side, he thought wryly). She could put it aside and help every time he looked at her during a crises situation.

Honestly, if he'd ever been right about something, it was that she would have been a smashing chief. In fact, if something happened to him, she could still be the next in line.

If she wanted. If it ever happened. Heck, even if it never did at this point.

He knocked on Goethi's door, receiving the double tap on the stone which usually meant to come in. Goethi was sitting on her stool as usual, her terrors flitting about and getting her this bottle of herbs or that sack of seeds as she mashed something up in one of her numerous stone mortars. When she looked up at him she gave him one of her deceptively wobbly smiles, ones that made her look like the feeble old woman she certainly was not.

"Hey, mother Goethi," he said with a nod. She waved him in, "I just need some more of my leg ointment. I've used up the honey paste."

She gave him a hard look, and he did his best not to flinch - he knew that she was also sharper than her 'doddering-old-lady' act indicated. With a shrug, she snapped her fingers and the terrors all stood to attention. A few scratches and taps later, one of them stepped forward, and then flew out the window when she pointed. An angry buzzing followed, and the following moment the terror came back with a piece of honeycomb in its mouth, licking bees off itself and crunching them enthusiastically.

Hiccup sat down as she got to work, making sure not to favour his right leg and to hide his wince - he didn't want her to ask to examine it. The terrors congregated around his feet, all looking up at him eagerly as if expecting a treat, which they possibly were. He sat up straighter, snapping his fingers and pointing. The terrors hesitated for a second before crawling away, looking back at him sometimes with a hopeful cringe. The only one left stubbornly sitting in front of him, chest out, was a green eyed, red terror who had an excited, waving tail and nostrils working overtime as he looked at Hiccup.

A tapping made him look at the Goethi, and he raised a brow. She cackled and scribbled a few symbols into the sooth beside the fire. One of them was an axe and the other was a nose.

"He smells the forge?" Hiccup asked. Goethi snorted, tapping the axe again and then slapping the top of her staff against his chest gently. What? Weapon, chestâ€¦ oh. "He smells Astrid?" he didn't question how the Goethi knew his feelings. Apparently everyone knew, and this old woman was no slouch. "How's that important?"

The Goethi smiled, drawing a chain, and then crossing it.

"She released him?" Hiccup asked. "He got caught in an old trap by mistake?" Goethi shook her head with a crooked smile again, and drew a couple of symbols. Hiccup scratched his head a little bit, looking at â€¦ a post, a ship and a night fury? "Wait, before I came?" Goethi nodded, going back to her mixing. He smiled down at the dragon, holding the back of his hand out.

The dragon responded instantly, rubbing his head against his hand back and forth and then scampered around, smelling at his leather wrist wraps and his leather buckles after giving his foot a good sniff. "Yeah, Astrid's touched all those." He smirked. "You have competition if you want her, buddy. You have to get in line behind her nadder and half the village!"

Goethi snorted. Hiccup ignored her this time, until he got a thwack on the head by her for it.

"Ow! What was that for!"

She'd put an arrow on the ground in front of the picture of a nadder and what looked like a gaggle of Vikings. Hiccup huffed.

"Will everyone stop telling me that how I feel is obvious? I get it already." He folded his arms and leaned back against the chair. He puffed his hair out of his face, and then got whacked again. "OW!" He glared at her, and she scratched an axe and then pointed the arrow at him from it again. The red terror hopped into his lap and he let it, petting it pensively, before Goethi put a ring around the axe with her staff and connected it with the arrow.

It wasn't hard to understand what she meant, then. He blushed and looked away. The Goethi scoffed and went back to her mortar, leaving Hiccup to his own devices as he stroked the terror into a nap.

So Astrid had released a dragon before he'd even come home, huh? That made one corner of his mouth rise slightly; she never did disappoint. And he knew that she had killed dragons, too, but that sort of made it even more amazing that she'd just turned around and released one.

Hiccup's eyes were drawn to the scratches in the ash involuntarily; yeah, she belonged to him. He knew that, objectively. He knew that very keenly. He was her promised, and as that, she was literally his to do as he pleased unless she broke the contract or divorced him.

He didn't want to think about it, because there were so many feelings and thoughts pulling him in so many different directions. A part of him wanted to pounce on the chance - this was what he had prayed for, this was what he had sacrificed good food for on the altars of Freya and Lofn; he had often begged either to be given a chance, or to be released of the feelings he had never been able to shake off. And here was his chance!

But another part of him was shivering, alert and tense, and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Or, well, the other metal foot.

Now that the elation of waking up and being alive and being home had faded, a tension, a sort of *expectation* had bled into him. He sometimes found himself looking around when people laughed, expecting them to be pointing at him and whatever stupid thing he was doing. He winced when someone yelled, a sarcastic comment ready on his mouth. He hyper-focused on every single task he undertook, obsessing on it till it's last detail so that he could make sure that it didn't go wrong, or it didn't backfire, or it didn't *fail*. Every time he succeeded, another little piece of that tension vanished; however, there was still a very large hunk of it hanging on his lungs.

And Toothless *had* plain *missed* him. Even though most of the time he was standing right next to him, Toothless had become more of an *accessory*. And he felt utterly and completely *horrible* for it. Toothless had seen him at his best, at his worst, and still stuck with him. He'd saved the dragon's life and had his own life saved by the dragon so many times now that it was routine. And yet, to steal

even an hour from a day to go flying with his friend left him feeling guilty. Left him feeling worried that frowns would begin blooming in the village if he wasn't there the moment anything happened where he was needed, if he let them down even once.

The terror tensed in his lap, so he forced himself to relax too, and the dragon followed suit. Toothless was off flying right now. He'd literally forced the dragon to go take a trip around the sky with Stormfly, attaching the tail which allowed him to fly on his own much to the black dragon's protestations. He'd gone, in the end, after a hug and an assurance that he'd be armed (Smoulder was therefore currently strapped to his side, getting in the way). Somehow, though, Hiccup thought that he had damaged his relationship with his best friend more than it was strained before. He was going to have to make serious reparations. A long sleepless night of flying was in order, or maybe a nice massage with fish oil. He'd just have to cope the day after.

Goethi tapped her staff, and one of the terrors flew off her counter with a small sack and landed on Hiccup's shoulder with the jar of his ointment full again. He stood, then stopped. The terror in his lap clung onto his leather armour and Hiccup looked down at it stuck to his chest like a gecko in bemusement. Goethi waved him away, and Hiccup smirked. When he tried to shoo the terror, however, it wouldn't budge.

"You know, I think I have just the solution for this problem. Do you mind having one less in your pack, Goethi?" She snickered and waving him away again. He gave a smile and headed for home, letting himself wince on the way down the stairs now with only the dragon to see. Sitting down had reduced his pain tolerance, as usual, and it took him a few steps to get his limp masked enough. He peeked inside once he got home, and was relieved to see that there was nobody there. The dragons were all out, too - a good sign. His father had been toting Fireworm around with a puffed out chest, and calling Brawlnife a drunk pussy for not getting a dragon himself. With a snort, Hiccup quickly got into the bath house, and with effort managed to drag one of the water supply canisters from the main room to the bathing room, and emptied half of it into the tub, promising himself that he'd re-fill it with Toothless' help later. He cajoled the terror into warming it up for him and quickly took his leg and clothes off and dragged himself into the tub, hissing and curling in on himself as his leg hit the water. He had been allowed to wet it for a few days now, and he quickly cupped water to drop onto the blister, which now was an ugly, angry red almost all the time. He quickly scrubbed the rest of his body and heaved himself out, emptying the water that had turned a rather unfetching colour between his wound and the soap.

He wished Toothless was there, because re-attaching the leg was torture. The tiny red terror gave him a hand by flapping at his arm as hard as he could, keeping some weight off his leg, but by the time he'd crossed the main area into his own sleeping space and closed the curtain, his stump was throbbing viciously.

It was sweet relief when he put the honey paste on. The vinegar sock nullified that completely, making pain shoot up so strongly that he hissed despite himself, and the little terror began throwing itself about in a frenzy until he calmed it. His adrenaline from long practice of dressing his own wounds kicked in, and he simply gritted his teeth and bundled up in his best clothes again, strapping his leg

back on and standing. Astrid had readied the clothes in a pile for him, and his chest gave a twinge of annoyance - he was very well capable of dressing himself, he'd been doing that since before he left, and he was not used to someone walking into his space when he was not there - what if he'd left a loincloth running around on the bed?

Then he remembered that she washed his loincloths. Then he remembered she'd seen him without one, and not in the best prospects, either. The roiling discomfort in his chest increased.

And â€œ the clothing was new, again? Hiccup shifted uncomfortably, looking at himself in the reflection of his polished shield, made out of his preferred iron alloy. Come to think of it, they were running short of it at the forge, and he'd have to borrow Meatlug to replenish the supply. If Fishlegs came with them, he could ask him about his searches â€œ discretely. That was actually not a bad ideaâ€œ

A flash caught his eye, and he looked at his reflection again. The tunic was woolen but fine, dyed a very dark green, and it was embroidered in red and silver thread on his shoulders with the Berk crest. As far as tunics went, it was beautiful, and went well with the dark suede trousers and matching belt and boots. Hiccup bit his lip, wondering why his father had wasted the money on several new outfits. He certainly hoped it was his father, at least; he couldn't quite stomach the thought that Astrid had sacrificed sleeping hours to sew them for him. The image of her cooped up with a needle and thread, haunched beside a candle instead of being out on patrol or simply flying Stormfly on a lark was a kick to the stomach.

He tried to clear his mind, tried to shake it off, but he knew it was impossible. Five years of distance and near solitude had not been able to do it, he doubted he'd manage the feat in one afternoon. She'd never been away from his thoughts - from remembering a long-lost memory of learning to unfeather chickens sitting down next to her while he did it alone on his island, to longing for her on cold Winter nights, where his thoughts had wandered to dreams rather than memories. He'd spoken to Sepha about her, when his shame had become too big. By then they had learned a few words in each other's language, enough to communicate comfortably, and she had laughed his fears away, saying that every woman wanted to be loved the way he did her. Hiccup doubted it; which woman wanted to have a man she barely spoke to dream of her while he slept with another?

He sighed, heading out, little terror still clinging to his shoulders and looking about excitedly. His mind was miles away, though, as he was hit by a wave of nostalgia; he wondered how Sepha was, whether she was well, safe, healthy. He wished her all the blessings of the gods. Sepha had become someone important in the months within which they'd travelled together. A friend, a counsellor, a teacher on how to live in the world out there that gave no one any quarter. By the end, they could communicate with a look, and she was the closest to a sibling he had ever hadâ€œ and yet, she had also been, from the start, a willing outlet to the physical longing he'd never thought he would indulge in. He had been the same for her, as she had once told him she also let herself think of her beloved husband when she was with him, long dead and buried. Their nights together had always had a tinge of sadness that had never left them, even after months. She

had taught him - patiently - how to please a woman, how to touch her and hold her; always, she used to say, with the aim that one day he would go back and sweep his 'Astreed' off her feet. It had always been bitter-sweet for Hiccup to hear that; it had been his favourite dream, his only fantasy to which he owned with shame, but he had always considered it the ultimate impossibility.

And now here she was, _sewing_ for him, like a little servant.

For the first time since he'd almost broken Snotlout's face, he had the urge to punch something _really hard_.

Astrid had always been ϵ almost a role model, to him. Someone he wanted to strive to become, to impress, because if he impressed _her_ then he would be good. Even along the way when starry-eyed, child-like admiration for his best friend had become the boyish realisation that - wow, Astrid was a girl, and maybe someday he could _kiss_ her - which then transformed into a burning passion whenever he saw her body move - he'd never really stopped admiring how _beautiful_ she was in battle. He wanted to fight beside her, wanted to spar with her. He wanted to fly miles and miles on end, _still_ _watching_ how her body moved on her dragon as she challenged him to another round - because Stormfly had a head-start, and that's not fair.

Granted, he ϵ looked at her differently, now. Whenever she entered a room, he couldn't stop his eyes from sweeping across her discretely. She was a beautiful, beautiful woman even when she was covered in flour from the mill. But she was not ϵ _his_ Astrid. He didn't know where the domesticity had come from, but while a part of him wished for it, he didn't know what to _do_ with it, and he wasn't sure how to reconcile the Astrid he knew - and the Astrid he knew was _still there_, from the weeks of training and fighting leading up to the showdown with the Red Death - to ϵ this. She had been herself when he was Cattongue; active, with a sense of challenge that was almost hostile and exhilarating. Fighting with axe-in-hand and fire in her eyes. But the moment his helmet had come off, she'd become ϵ something else. He wasn't even sure what it was, but it was like she was hiding behind the curtain of duty, doing what she had to do and going through the motions because she had to. And every time he did something out of place, something to remind her that she was stuck with him, she retreated further away. It was true that she had hugged him, and even kissed him, but he'd come to the conclusion that she had been trying to get used to the idea, to be Astrid and take their eventual marriage as a challenge. She had probably been that happy that night after she'd kissed him because she'd managed to do that without feeling too bad, not for any of the reasons _he_ was rejoicing about.

He was glad he had cut the bathing sessions short, at least. Not even in his five years of travel, or when he was half a world away, had he felt farther away from her than in those moments. Gods, the utilitarian way in which she looked at him and touched him tore at his heart. She never really blushed beyond a partial show of discomfort at the start, he never really caught her looking at him in any way that may have been interpreted as interest. Just yesterday, she'd walked in on him fallen from his bed, practically naked, and her eyes had never lingered as a lover's would. She'd just looked and laughed.

Well, that was a great thought to have. His chest wasn't in danger of hurting anymore if he'd been run through by Tuffnut's spear. At least, this was increasing his upper-chest pain tolerance. Or maybe it was heart disease.

He knocked on the door and waited a few moments, hoping he wasn't too late. But there was shuffling inside, and noise - too much noise for his knock to be heard, possibly. After quite a long time had elapsed, he knocked again.

A frazzled-looking young girl opened the door, hair half-done and dress pinned in various places. Hiccup blinked at her, and she blinked back until she squeaked, blushed and ducked back inside. Brunhilda was at the door instantly, giving him a glowing smile as she looked at him and complimented his outfit, unfortunately confirming that it was Astrid's work in the process.

A part of him felt thrilled her fingers were touching his skin vicariously. Another part of him was listing the number of reasons why he was a pathetic little horn-dog for having even thought of that. He'd probably be luckier if he tried to woo a gronkle, with the amount of charm he had.

"Is Åttta up?" he asked, and Brunhilda laughed.

"Like she can be anything else with all this din," Astrid's mother said with even more humour. She craned her head, looking about the room full of men and women preparing for the feast, and men - was that Astrid's father, naked to the balls as he smoked a pipe as someone combed his hair?

Urk. He could have gone all his life without seeing that.

"Ah, there she is, little rascal. Wants to stay up for the feast, she says." Brunhilda pointed to a corner, where a pair of bright eyes and a bobbing blonde head were peeping out at the frantic proceedings going on around the hall, the men playing on the boards as the women washed and prepar- ack, someone was in the tub and washing while he was in the room. This was insane.

He made a beeline to the corner, making sure to duck his head and look nowhere near the tub on the other side of the room. Honestly, they didn't even have it curtained off - ah, Brunhilda was putting the curtain up now, and two of the younger girls were squealing in the corner because he was in the room and they were in their underclothes. Perf- aaand the men (naked men, oh for Thorâ€!)2 were laughing at it all. No, no, now it was perfect. All he needed was to trip in his own feet and fall face first into something.

Luckily, he managed to get to the barrel corner without incident, little Åttta crawling away and trying to hide in the crevice between the round barrel and the flat wall. She looked at him with big eyes, trying to see whether he would be angry at her.

"You should be in bed, little one," he said mildly, and her face fell right away.

"I want to go to the big Hall, with everyone," she pouted, crossing her arms in a familiar manner that made his heart ache. He patted his chest, and she crawled towards him hesitantly at first, and then more

resolutely, sitting with her head against his chest, frowning at the dark little space she'd been hiding in with a set jaw and stubborn chin.

Unf, it was like looking through Urd's tapestry, back ten or more cycles, down to the twin pigtails. All she needed was a silly fool of a twig boy, following her around like a lost pup.

Speaking of pups.

"Well, you can't go little one, because then who would take care of him?" He pointed a thumb at the curious terror, who was twitching on his shoulder and trying to stretch his neck as far as possible to look at the girl without falling off. He offered a hand as a platform and the terror crawled upon it, now at a better vantage point to sniff at the girl. Obviously her resemblance to Astrid didn't stop at her face, because the sniffing got his tail twitching. Åttta's eyes doubled in size, and her new dolls, hugged to her belly, slid to her tiny lap as she extended an arm to the terror, who took the scratching with a blissful little purr and upturned eyes.

"He's a little naughty, but I'm sure Aunty Astrid will help you train it. And one of your cousins, too â€œ I knew that at least two of them are in my class," he said, giving the two girls in question, who were looking at him and giggling, a look that sent them hiding behind the curtain. "He'll keep your feet warm, too, and he likes to stay on your shoulder, so your ears won't get chilly once you go out. But you have to watch him, you hear?"

Åttta gave a solemn nod. He couldn't resist kissing her crown.

"Why are you so nice to me, Uncle Hiccup?" she asked, blinking up at him. "Is it because I remind you of Aunty Astrid?" Ah, he was transparent even to the babies. It was truly pathetic, really, be he couldn't bring himself to mind the little girl.

"Well, there is that," he said, taking her pinky again3, and bringing it close to his chest once more. She grinned, nodding, pleased with herself because she remembered what he'd said last time. "But I've also not been able to keep my promise to you and take you up on Toothless. Both of us have been so busy, doing human things and dragon things. And I don't like not keeping my promises."

"That's naughty," the girl replied in a conspiratory whisper. "But you can't help it if you're busy, or if there should have been a picnic and it rains. Mama always said that gods do what they want, and we can only pick up the pieces." Åttta frowned, then. "Although I don't really know what we should be picking up. Is it the almond nuts, Uncle Hiccup?"

He couldn't help the smile. Honestly, this girl â€œ

"Sometimes it's the almond nuts. Other times, you have to give someone a nice smile, so that they can pick up these." He tapped the corners of his mouth. She smiled and he couldn't help answering.

"There, that's better. So now, the gods said you can't go to the big Hall tonight, because only grown-ups can. But look what they brought you instead."

Åttta nodded, letting the terror climb onto her tiny shoulders, where

the small dragon barely fit. It scuttled about slightly, making her giggle as it tickled, and then curled up more tightly around her neck like a fur shawl, snuggling it's head under her chin.

"Can I really keep him, Uncle Hiccup?" she asked, rubbing the terror along his back.

"You'll ask your mama, but he's a gift from me. And mother Goethi."

"Mama can't say no, then!"

"No, she can't!" he chirped back, incredibly cheered up by the tiny sunshine of her smile. He kissed her crown again and stood with her in his arms, crossing the room full of giggling women to put her into a large bed with another six children. One of them eeked at the dragon, but Hiccup soothed her enough when he showed how warm the little terror would keep the bed.

Then he turned to the room to find most of the girls looking at him, though, luckily, the men chose that moment to make a ruckus when someone won a decent hand at the board game. Hacknee Hofferson was still stark naked. Oh, for all the gods.

Astrid used to be part of this madness? Serious, straight laced, warrior Astrid? He blinked at the room of shrieking, laughing girls, loud, uproarious men and felt a little dizzy. He tried to imagine Astrid here, and he simply couldn't. Certainly not the Astrid he'd known, the tough girl who smiled only when she'd done well on a training exercise, or when she was punching someone and then calling them a wuss. And yet, this was Astrid's clan. She was on good terms with her mother and father, so it wasn't like she didn't fit in. And she cared for them, enough to be in tears over $\ddot{\text{A}}$ ttta's illness. Hiccup almost sat down to look at them, only to remember, with some chagrin, that he should be in the Hall already, to mingle with the leading families before the rest of the tribe arrived. Astrid was probably already there, and by Odin's eye, he wasn't standing her up.

He left the hall quickly (still making sure to look nowhere near anyone who was not fully dressed) with a wave at Brunhilda who was busy braiding someone's hair.

The trek up to the Hall was miserable. The good mood $\ddot{\text{A}}$ ttta had given him evaporated into a mist of uncomfortable questions and trying not to wince at every step, as the long, long staircase didn't help with the chafing, and each additional step was making him hate this stupid dance more and more.

The heat engulfed him when he finally pushed the heavy doors open and he shuddered thankfully. He'd forgotten to put a cloak on, and he was paying for it.

In fact, judging by Astrid's scowl, he'd pay for it later, too.

But by the paths trod by the gods Astrid was wearing a tunic which matched his, down to the details on the shoulders and nope, not a tunic, that was a dress. And her hair was intricately braided and knotted, even her usually floppy fringe had been gathered up. Strands of ringlets fell down in select places to curl around her shoulders

like golden rivulets.

His jaw was open. He had to close that jaw. Close it!

Of course, he didn't. Astrid hit it gently with a knuckle and he managed to look away and swallow, but it didn't help his stupid, burning face at all. She was wearing a dress. A dress. Tonight, the new domestic Astrid and the warrior Astrid had both been left outside, and instead there was this â€| this woman he didn't know who could floor him with a single...

Punch.

"Ow!" he hissed in a low voice. She had punched him in the gut, arm around his waist to keep him from toppling.

"Wuss," she answered with a small frown. "That's for keeping me waiting." She smiled, one corner of her mouth rising upwards, as she stepped aside and kept one arm around him, giving him a squeeze. "So, shall we?"

He nodded at her, her closeness, for once, leaving him with feelings of discomfort instead of all the others she usually instigated. He didn't know her; she wasn't the child who had played with him as a bairn, letting him braid her hair which had stayed a lasting fascination. Nor was she the driven girl who had pinched him and prodded him to be better, even from afar as he looked from the forge window. She was still Astrid, but â€|

Well, he had changed, too. He wasn't the quiet, silly pushover boy he used to be. Perhaps, she was trying to get to know him, too. And if his aching gut said anything, she was still Astrid, really, just â€| five years later.

An idea struck him, then, and he stole a glance down at her as she walked them both towards the center of the already slightly-crowded room. Perhaps â€| it was a stupid idea, really, especially considering the official state of their relationship â€| but then again, wasn't it usually how it happened anyway? It was the most dangerous sport for any young man, after all. But he was Hiccup Haddock, and after having lived through what he had, he'd learned that his father wasn't the only one with stubbornness issues.

So, yeah â€| should he â€| court her, then? Make it official, too. Inform her of his intentions, make it clear that he wanted the marriage to work, that he wanted to get to know her better, spend time with her as a potential husband, show her that he was husband material. Give her gifts, attention and â€| well, full on court her. His heart started beating rather quickly as the idea took shape in his mind and looked like a real possibility. It was his right, he could court her freely and officially with absolutely no repercussions, because of the contract. And he could make it clear that if she did not change her mind about him, if she didn't see him as husband-stuff by the time the Winter was out, then they'd go their separate ways, no harm done. But then, he'd have a chance. An official chance where all was clear between them, where she couldn't equivocate his intentions, and couldn't â€| yeah. This was his chance, to make her stop seeing him as a child to be nursed and start seeing a man in him. It was his chance to know her too - to find out the things he hadn't discovered before he left, the things she kept

hidden from everyone; show her he was ready to listen, to help, to be there â€| even when she didn't want him to. Find out who she'd become in the last five years, and share his own secrets, if she wanted to hear.

He halted in their progress across the hall, forcing her to stop too by the arm that she had around his waist. He swallowed the suddenly thick wad of cloth that had somehow found its way down his throat - or so it felt like - and gave her a tentative smile. She smiled at him in return, looking confused, and the expression helped to distract him from how utterly beautiful she looked in the torch-light.

"Say," he started, trying to give her a smile that wasn't nervous, and grasping onto the first thing that he could think of as an opening. "Tomorrow the talks are going to last all day. Will you be there?" I hope you will.

"Oh!" she asked, relaxing and shrugging. "I will probably be there in the morning, though I might not be able to for the evening talks. Chores aren't going to do themselves."

"About that," he said resolutely, "I wasn't lying when I said I would help. Dad has me tied up at the moment, but the Thing will be over in two weeks, and if we're honestâ€|" he gave her a sheepish smile and ducked his head so she could hear his lowered voice over the din. "I used to enjoy doing part of the chores. My cooking is still terrible, but I was decent at salting and filleting, and I make a mean folder for the laundry." And I want to spend time with you, any excuse will doâ€|

She snorted. "I do remember that you and your dad were always well dressed. Can you mend, too? Because I like sewing, but mending is the serpent's head. I'll take you up on the offer if you mend your own socks," she said jokingly.

It was working. He already learned that she liked sewing. She liked sewing, who knew. The last they'd spoken, she'd hated all the new domestic tasks and lessons her mother had been piling on her, because it cut down on her axe time.

"I'll mend all you like," he said cheerfully. "Leatherwork's made me good with a needle, not to mentionâ€|" nope, sewing up your own wounds was not an adequate courting topic. Shut up, mouth. "...having only one sock of my own, I'll have plenty of time to fix other people's, too." There, better. Now â€| now to ask her, properly. "And â€| when this is all over, and we have more time, maybe we â€| couldâ€|" Spit it out! "... take the dragons out for a good long race." Ung. he was a wuss. "I know I have to make it up to Toothless. Big time â€| he's going to be giving me the cold shoulder for weeks." Right, talk about his dragon. He was sure Astrid was extremely interesting in his dragon's moods. Might as well talk about the lint that got stuck between his toes too, she'd be riveted.

"That's a great idea," she replied, smiling up at him. She looked about three times brighter than she had before. For a second, he even forgot the horrid pain in his leg as his heart gave a jolt. Yes, Freya was on his side tonight. "I know Stormfly misses me, and she's not even stuck to ground the way Toothless is. I'm impressed you got

him to go up at all, today."

"That's why I'm going to get a colder shoulder than an ice-giant's," he replied with some humour. "That darn lizard took me sending him to fly as well as he would take me hiding an eel in his basket. I'm surprised my hair isn't on fire."

"I'll make sure to keep a bucket of water handy tomorrow, then. Thanks for the warning," Astrid replied, with a jovial smile, and the sass he was so very familiar with. A huge part of his chest suddenly ached, desiring to bend down and kiss her mouth, possess it with all the fire he *æ*! no. He had to take it a step back. He was going to *court* her. And then, only when he was sure she *wanted* him to kiss her with the yearning that he felt, then he could kiss her. For now he'd *æ*! this. Make her smile like that and laugh like that. It would be enough - whether it *was* enough or not, it would be enough.

He smiled at her, laughing and letting an arm fall around her to mirror her own, feeling even more jovial when she did not stiffen. Tiny steps, perhaps that was the way. And there was no reason why he should tell her that he wanted to court her *just now*; they'd still be engaged once the Thing was over, and he could tell her privately, on that first dragon race, when they landed to eat and it was just them and their dragons. He'd speak to her there, tell her his intentions and let her decide whether she wanted to end it there, or wanted to give him the chance to court her, properly, charm her as much as he could and hopefully, with Freya and Lofn and all the gods' help, win her over.

He smiled, his chest swelling with hope again. He had a chance. He *really* had a chance. If she gave it to him, by the gods, he'd make sure she was as thoroughly courted as any woman ever was. A spark of excitement followed the hope; he wanted to get to know her again, too. He wanted her to know him and be comfortable with it. And if the village chores came in the way, then he'd find a way around them. Or find a way around other things. Sleep was over-rated anyway.

"Ung," he said, as his father spotted them and waved them over. "Fun. Let's go do this official thing, shall we?"

"Don't sound too enthusiastic, Future-Chief. The Hall may not contain it," she replied, and the sass went straight to his chest (and other places he was not going to think of) again,

"Oh, I know, there's few places that can contain this much raw Viking," he said with a lofty air, and readily avoided the punch to the shoulder. "What, can't handle my lame jokes?" he said cheekily, shaking his leg, and she blushed before snorting at him and shaking her head.

"Not funny, Hiccup," she said, sparing his leg a glance and looking up at him with eyes slightly muted. "You scared us."

"But it's past, and laughing at it makes it seem farther away," he said, sharing something he'd learned on his own skin. She snorted again and then let her arm fall from around him as they arrived beside his father, prompting him to, reluctantly, do the same. With the idea of the courting firmly in his mind, now, it made him feel better about anything she did. He was ready to take anything she gave him, no matter how small, and he'd let her set the pace. He had let

their engagement taint his expectations with how he wanted her to behave, as his promised, and that was not right.

The first part of the evening, where only the leading families were in the hall, passed almost enjoyably. There was ale enough and mead enough to keep everyone happy, and after a few hours, Hiccup was glad to sit beside Thuggory and Heather, who had finally arrived that afternoon on the ship. His stump throbbed viciously, but he drank just enough ale to bear it - especially if he didn't stand again tonight.

He took another swig, sitting with his side resting against the table and his bad leg raised on the bench on one side, Astrid sitting beside him on the other. The ale was good, the Hall well warmed, and the company pleasant. He wasn't a fan of feasts, not with his cache of childhood memories (especially not the one where he'd accidentally set all the caskets on fireâ€¢), but he had to admit that if things kept being this pleasant (and especially if Astrid kept -mmm, nice-leaning into his side like thatâ€¢), he was actually in the chance to enjoy himself tonight.

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Thuggory guzzled down another tankard, flagging a woman passing to bring him more mead. The stuff on Berk was water compared to what they had on Freezing, especially now, with Heather's dad doing his thing in the brewery.

"It takes some getting used to," Heather was saying, swilling honeyed water around her keg and looking enviously at their mead and ale. Astrid was sitting beside Hiccup, listening with an understanding face. "And I can't say I enjoy my stomach being in the wrong place of my body almost all the time. It feels like I've eaten a live fish and â€¢ ung." She grimaced, the image obviously not agreeing with her aforementioned organ. Thuggory tucked her into his side, and she leaned into him gratefully, looking suddenly warn and green.

"Do you need to go rest, Heather?" Astrid said, kindly. Hiccup gave her an understanding smile. "I'll take you if you want. It's no chore. Are there any women who can assist you in the guest hall?"

"Not really," Heather grumbled, "unless you count this oaf's aunt. And I swear, she's worse than a pack of terrors when it comes to being obnoxious. I'm more likely to rest here than I am in the hall with her sitting there and telling me how very bad I am at the art of lying down and sleeping." Thuggory pouted sheepishly, receiving a vicious glare that made him wince. "And don't dare defend her. You know as well as I do that she hates me, thinks I'm a social climber of the worst kind, and would do anything to have you divorced from me. She's still sour about the fact that you got to choose me, and that she didn't get to be the one who hand-picked your bride."

"Eh, she thinks she rules the tribe from the inside," Thuggory said with an eye-roll to Hiccup. "I can't say it's not going to be a great day when she kicks the bucket, and that I won't call a feast. Hopefully she'll do it before I'm chief though, because I have the mad urge to ship her off tied to a mast if she so much as breathes in the direction of saying 'Oh, Thuggory dear', " he started in a falsetto, sitting up straighter and waving a hand on a floppy wrist.

"Really, you should know by now that brown tunics shouldn't be worn during this time of the cycle - only in the spring, to honour Frigga. Oh youth these days!"

The entire table laughed, though Heather only cringed.

"Like I said, I'd much rather stay here. Even if you managed to stop her from bullying you out because you're Hiccup's promised, it would still be a miserable time for the both of us in that place with her, glaring at us because she's too old and ugly to dance in public without turning someone into a toad just by looking at her."

"Heather," Thuggory said, tone only marginally reproachful, as he snickered some more at his apparently horrid aunt's expense. "And speaking of dancing!"

A jaunty tune started up, people forming a line and hopping about to it with laughs, jeers, leers and ale splashing everywhere. Someone wolf-whistled and then got punched in the face, and it turned out that Tuffnut had punched Snotlout in the face for whistling at ϵ Cami was at least dancing, if with one of her tribe sisters. Thuggory caught Hiccup's eyes as he looked over at them worriedly, and then understood his meaning immediately when Hiccup nodded him towards the crowd.

"Ah, can't really ϵ he shrugged, but Hiccup widened his eyes at him, and Heather kicked him under the table. Ow, ow, right, there were too many ears. Cami's affairs were to stay between them until a time when they could be fixed.

The doors opened, and it had apparently skipped their notice that - well, of course. Tuff and Snotlout were there, so the other people of Berk had already begun trickling in. Therefore, the generals and other guests of the leading families from the other tribes also began to join. The dancing line became longer, and the punches in the face - as well as a few kisses here and there - became more frequent. Hiccup laughed as Gobber started hopping around opposite Bertha, and Thuggory joined in the catcalls when the chief of the Boggies started giving the one-handed smith a rather steamy look.

"I've never seen Gobber's mustache jiggle like that!" Hiccup laughed with good humour, and Astrid joined in, face jovial as she chuckled into her cider. "I hope he wore clean undies."

Astrid choked on her drink, laughing coughs as she slapped his shoulder, and Thuggory was glad to see them getting along, despite the rather staged protestation of pain and accusations of wussiness.

Heather sighed at his side, and he looked down at her.

"You're going to do it?" she whispered, nodding mutely towards the other couple, masking it as a snuggle of her cheek into his shoulder. Thuggory nodded. In all honesty, they didn't look like they needed help right now, not with Hiccup's eyes wondering enough to show his interest (though he never let her see - wise man, he liked his man-bits where they were) and her face glowing and gaze lingering on his. They were so damn obvious, but Thuggory was beginning to realise that they were obvious to anyone but each other.

He should know, Heather and he had gone through the same thing. When they'd met, she'd just managed to escape from Outcast island, battered and bruised. When he'd pledged to help her, she hadn't believed him, so she'd drugged his mead and stolen his money and weapons. He'd pretty much fallen in love with her there and then. He'd gone hunting for her as soon as he could get back to the village proper and recruit Hiccup, who had luckily been working on his dad's chainmail at the time. By the time they'd returned to Freezing with her on Clover carrying her parents, it was waaay too late for his poor heart. Unfortunately for the both of them, Heather hadn't - in her darling sweet manipulative head - believed that tattered clothes and zero status could hold attraction beyond the, er, obvious for a tribal heir who was practically a prince, and Thuggory was under no illusion of being the sharpest tool in the shed, certainly not smart enough for someone who was always three steps ahead of most people in the room.

There had been a terrible week when he'd thought less than pleasant thoughts about Hiccup as Heather had taken to hiding in his forge more often than not, but it turned out she'd only been mooning about him, and Hiccup had slowly been turning her around to the idea that getting into her leggings alone really wasn't going to be the deal with Thuggory.

Not that it wasn't part of the deal. Repeatedly. His wife was hot.

So, one good deed deserved another, and Hiccup was going to get his expert, married-man advice and help.

And he would admit that Heather and he had been lucky too; the moment his dad heard that her father was a brewer, and that he was offering caskets upon caskets of mead as a bride price, it had been a done deal. Aunt Glunda was still seething that she had been forbidden to taste it instead of Brawlnife to test quality, but everyone knew that she would have refused it all, if only to spite them and bring bad luck onto their marriage. One of the only times he'd blessed his father's affinity to drink.

"If you are, do it fast dear," she said. Dear. It still gave him a thrill. And made him feel old. Ung, he'd barely started knotting his side burns, and they were SO going to turn white soon. Anyway, what? "I spot Dogsbreath getting closer and closer to our table with every passing song, and it would be best not to speak of anything in front of him."

Thuggory nodded. He felt rather sorry for the boy; he'd always sort of been on the margins, and he had always been closest with Thuggory, though there had simply been a different relationship there than the childhood bond between him, Hiccup and Cami. And now he'd been summarily punted out of their group. Sure, he deserved it - no one liked a tattletale, especially when it hurt them all so directly (his father had not been happy at being left out of the loop, although Thuggory's ability to lie had drastically improved since his marriage through sheer survival instinct and learning from his dear wife). Yet the fact remained; until proven otherwise, he was currently on their black list.

"Ask Astrid to dance," Heather whispered, and Thuggory looked down at

her, agast. "Don't look at me like that, you ninny. Everyone knows that you're married, and that Hiccup is your battle brother. There is nothing wrong in taking his promised out when he can't."

"Can't?" he whispered, confused. Heather leaned further against him, and he rubbed her arm; her being this tired was due to the babe, he knew, but it still made his chest twinge. If anything, right now it was probably saving him from an eyeroll and being called dull.

"His leg, I think it's hurting, but he'll never say it."

"But if she won't come â€|"

"Insist; Hiccup will probably want to see her dancing, so he'll help you there." Heather gave him a sly look. "I know how you men's brains work, dear, and the next best thing he has to dancing with her is watching her dance with someone he trusts. You can talk to her while you two dance. And Dogsbreath won't come to the table if there's just me and him, I don't think. He was always closest to you."

"Will you be ok, beloved?" he asked sadly. And it was a mark of how much she cared for him that whenever he said something sappy like that she just huffed a laugh and blushed instead of punting him a good one.

"I'm not going to be doing anything but sitting here. I think I can manage that, even with a babe in the belly."

"Well, alright thenâ€|"

He slowly untangled himself from her, shrugging off his cloak and putting it around her before he rose (and the fact that Heather only huffed at him and didn't shrug it off told him volumes). Sliding out of the bench, he went around the table and held his hand out to Astrid.

"My lady," he said with a grin, making a bow and attracting the laughter of their neighbouring tables. Fishlegs and his wife were walking up, grinning like buffoons as Astrid went crimson. "Since my own lady is indisposed, may I have your hand for this dance?"

"Oh, but, I'm â€| I was hoping that, I meanâ€|" She turned to Hiccup, who was looking at her wide eyed at the inferred meaning. Her face went a darker shade of red as a very gratified grin spread on Hiccup's face before he cleared his throat and sat up straighter. A few whistles and catcalls around them from the somewhat already drunken denizens of the Hall made her duck her head. Thuggory couldn't blame Hiccup for being so smitten with her, especially when she raised a fist and punched his side.

"Owâ€| I really can't, Astrid," he said, rubbing his side and then nodding towards his leg. "I â€| wouldn't have minded, but I really don't think it's a good idea."

"Oh?" she asked. The colour faded slightly from her cheeks as she looked at him worriedly. "Maybe I can give it a look, later."

"Oh, no need," he waved her off. Hiccup looked away at Heather long enough to miss Astrid's face falling completely. "I've had Goethi give it a look, and it's doing well. Just a â€| just a little tired.

And Heather won't be alone this way."

"Butâ€|"

"Oh, do go," Heather sighed dramatically, resting a cheek on her fist. "I'll never hear the end of it if he has to sit all night. He'll have too much energy to sleep, and then he'll either drive me nuts fidgeting about, or I'll kick him out and poor Fanghorn will suffer a night flight."

"Woman, no kicking me out of the marriage bed," Thuggory said in mock outrage to some whistling and jeering. Heather only smirked.

"The marriage bed's back home. Now go show Hiccup how to dance with two left feet."

"That's not very encouraging," Astrid said with a laugh, although she did stand up. Thuggory noticed she gave Hiccup one last look before she allowed herself to be dragged away, "Did he tell you anything about his leg?" she asked once they were out of earshot, throwing a worried look over her shoulder.

"Eh, he's not a complainer," Thuggory shrugged. They ducked an apple, Astrid turning to shake a fist at a large woman who turned out to be her mother, and they moved on, weaving around drunken folk, saying hi to Fishlegs and Ruffnut who had paused to haul Tuff off Snotlout.

"That's what I'm worried about," she sighed, flicking an escaping strand of hair from her face.

"Eh, he's a man, he knows how to take care of himself," Thuggory said with a shrug. They joined the line, and ironically, the din around them gave them a great deal of privacy to talk while they danced. They circled each other with an arm on the other's shoulder, and then stopped to clap on either side and repeated it in the opposite direction. "Though I have to say, that took some guts, asking him to dance with you like that. He's used to girl attention, but he's never responded before," he confided, more than a little happy to gossip and do some good at the same time. Astrid gave him a calculating look.

"Used to it?" she asked; urk, trust women to latch on to the unimportant part of the sentence. Still â€|

"Well, he was popular with the ladies on most Islands - not as much as me of course." They paused for them to turn back to back, kicking out at the appropriate moments. The expression on her face as she turned to face him again was a mix of apprehension and derisive amusement. "What, you don't think I'm a handsome catch?" He puffed his chest out and she laughed. The music picked up and he took her up and swung her on the other side of him on the time, noting her very red face as she turned around him like a maypole. "He was good at this, too. Taught my little sister how to dance."

"Hmm," she said, "I should have danced with him first, he is my â€| my promised," she said, throwing a look over her shoulder, and her face couldn't have been more different than the fiery maiden who had pronounced the same thing months ago, axe to his throat and rain falling around them. Her statement had been strong and bold, then,

rain-wet hair plastered to her face and eyes blazing to know where he was, ride out and rescue him if she had to. And now there he was in her hands, and she didn't know what to do with him.

Aw, they were so cute. They really needed his help.

"That he is, lass, but don't hold it against him, aye? He doesn't invite the attention and doesn't reciprocate it," he said. "And I tell you, he wouldn't have let you go dance with anyone else he didn't trust. Maybe Fishlegsâ€| can't see any of the others happening. He's got an eye for you." Astrid snorted. "Make fun of me, but I don't lie. Oh, the stories Cami can tell you about how fast he ran from the Boggiesâ€| there was one where he hid in the rafters of her bedroom to get rid of some relative or other." Astrid barked a laugh before covering her mouth and looking around at the other dancers, making sure they weren't listening. She elbowed him as they passed each other. "Ow, mean bones, there. But you? He totally lets you next to him, and he seeks you out himself when he gets the chance. You saw how uncomfortable the Boggie generals made him when they were sighing at him in the meeting â€| but he doesn't mind you close to him and touching him. There's a big sign."

"You think?" she asked, and Thuggory was glad that they had to interrupt for a few moments as they danced with the person diagonal to them, because he could hide his shit-eating grin. That question gave her away, with the tone of voice and the slightly worried look beneath her lashes. She wanted Hiccup to like her, and that was a sure-fire way to tell if any Viking woman was interested.

When she wasn't, she punched you in the face and told you so, his wife said.

So, it should be easy from here. Hiccup liked her, he knew that from the axe thing - and he remembered Cami saying something about falling for a girl when he was 12 or something like that â€| time to push the ducky.

"Yes, of course," he said when they were once again dancing with each other, and grin was marginally less obscene. "And I recall there was this girl he was mooning about while he made my wedding axes â€| someone from here he made an axe for whom he'd likedâ€|"

Thuggory totally took credit for the blush on her face. And if Hiccup got laid tonight, he would owe him. Maybe he could be godfather of their first kid. He got to skip the line and be godfather! Or they could even name it after him. Thuggory Haddock the First; sounded awesome.

"Right," she said, composing herself. "He did make me an axe when we were younger. I didn't even know it was him until Gobber told me." She winced. "After he left."

"Hmm," he said, threading her arm inside his and going round in circles. "He missed you, you know?"

"What?" she asked, clearly startled.

"Oh yeah, I think he missed you the most." he said, containing his grin to try to look sage and brotherly. "Wouldn't mention anyone from Berk; but you? You came up a few times, and he was all bent out of

shape that you were probably married to someone else, too."

"He â€œ| he spoke of me, huh." The corners of her mouth twitched upwards. "The little liarâ€œ|"

"Oh?" Thuggory asked.

"When he was Cattongue, he told me 'Hiccup' never spoke of me."

"Well, he didn't like to speak of Berk," Thuggory admitted with a shrug. "He loved this damn tribe and he thought he wasn't welcome here." Aw, screw him three ways to Ragnarok, he didn't want to make her face fall like that. "But I tell you, when I told him he was promised to you -" He panicked, denied it and refused to speak for the rest of the night. "He was really moved. Poor guy was struck speechless." Ha! And Heather said his poetic ability was lame! "And don't tell him I said this," he pretended to look around before ducking his head, "but he seriously thinks you have the best legs on Midgard. And don't get him started about your hair." He tried to remember anything else Hiccup'd moaned about when he'd been drunk, but came up blank. Damn shy man. "Don't tell him this either, I sort of broke the man's code telling you that. If he finds out, he'll have the right to kill me." He paused as they skipped a step. "Or pull my trousers down in public. Not very comfortable with either."

Astrid laughed openly then, even as they moved back into the line and clapped as the song stopped. He offered her his arm dramatically, which she took with a grin.

"So, ask him to dance again. If his foot hurts that much, talk him into a corner then strip-search him." Astrid looked startled for a second, before she started laughing along side him.

"He wouldn't like thatâ€œ|" she said, quieting down suddenly. "He doesn't like it when I try to help with his leg."

"Yeah, that's because he's trying to be all manly for you," Thuggory snickered. Then stopped. "I'm giving out lots of secrets of the man code here for my brother. He'd better appreciate it because if the other guys find out, I'm toast."

"I'm sure you and Bloodlust will be fine," Astrid replied cheekily as they began weaving through the people. "Even if they threaten that now you have to learn how to use a loom."

Thuggory shuddered, Astrid grinning up at him with a true Viking's malice. Once they were at their table, however, they both stopped short, as neither one of the people they had left sitting there, seemingly incapacitated, were there anymore, and the table had been occupied by people neither one of them knew. Thuggory blinked around, a sliver of worry blossoming in his belly. As he craned his neck, he heard a muted gasp beside him.

He turned to find Astrid looking the other way, her face slack as she stared at the people lining up for the next dance. Thuggory winced at her expression, wondering what on earth could make her look so profoundly hurt that she forgot to guard her featuresâ€œ| and then he turned just in time to see Hiccup clap the opening of the dance with the other men as a fast-paced tune filled the room.

"The childhood infatuation seems to be gone, Thug," Astrid said, her tone flat and her face schooling itself into the hard lines of a smile. She nodded at him, her face wooden, before she quickly scurried out towards the door, bumping into a few people on the way and looking upset enough that they all began to talk and mumble.

Thuggory grimaced, but then he also began looking at every single corner for his dear Heather, because Hiccup up there wasn't dancing with her at all, and he was looking as pale as death, lips a grim line and movements jolty. Shit he wasn't kidding when he said he was in pain; there was more to this than met the eye.

"Yo."

Thuggory turned around to find himself face-to-face with Snotlout. He nodded politely and planned to ignore him until the other man folded his arms across his chest and turned to look at the dancers.

"So, your wife felt all woozy and Fishlegs and Ruff took her to their place."

Thuggory blinked at him, but nodded gratefully and turned to go.

"Wasn't done yet," he said again, and Thuggory turned with an annoyed word that died on his mouth when he saw Snotlout's grim expression as he followed the dancers with his eyes. "Hiccup was supposed to wait for you two so that he could tell you, and then he said he was probably going to head in. He said â€œ he _admitted _the leg was hurting." Both men exchanged a grim look, and turned back to the pale-faced man who was hopping around with his cheeks turning colours every time he landed on his bad leg.

"What the heckâ€œ" Thuggory growled.

"The UglyThugs set this up," Snotlout replied. "Look, I'll wait for him here. I think he's going to need help getting home. You go after your girl, ok? We need to meet so we can talk about this," Snotlout hissed urgently. "You have to back him up at the talks, ok? I don't know what's going on, but I don't like it."

Thuggory nodded, taking a moment to take the other man's face in. Was this the same guy who'd let Hiccup down so badly during the battle for Berk? It would seem that Hiccup was right, again, when he said that Snotlout was making amends.

"I'll hold you to that." With a grim nod, he ran out of the hall.

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Tuff hit hard, Snotlout thought as he lay on the floor under a random table, looking up at the Hall lights through the gaps between the wood. His helmet had rolled under here and he'd come after it, but he'd hit his head on one of the benches and, already being dazed from Tuff's right hook, he'd just let himself lie there for a few moments, the world spinning between the hits and the mead.

He hadn't even been whistling at Tuff's damn woman, just at that pretty girl with the sweet, long strawberry blonde hair. They'd spoken a little since he'd been cross with her some, and he wanted to ask her to a dance - the mead made him courageous. Then he gets pounced into the ground by the damn drougr from Helheim in Tuffnut form, and that went sod to the dogs.

Snotlout had realised some time ago that he was underneath Hiccup's table, and that Hiccup didn't know he was there. The woman he was talking to wasn't Astrid, and it took him a while to place her as Thugg- Thurs- Thugdamnit's wife.

Five beer kegs on the wall, five beer kegsâ|. the song was stuck in his head, but it had it's appeal.

A whimper to the side caught his attention, and a pair of pretty legs - ah, wait, that was someone's, Thuggory's, wife - began twitching about as their owner moved uncomfortably. Fishlegs and Ruffnut made a commotion on the other end of the table beside Snotlout's feet, and Hiccup laughed at something the girl-twin said, and then tapped his metal let against the bench.

"I swear sometimes I wish I could just take the whole thing off at the hip, put it on my desk and take a rest from it," he laughed.

"Well, you have recovered almost 60% more rapidly than most leg amputees," Fishlegs said.

"I had good care," Hiccup replied warmly. "But I wasn't about to let her miss the dancing because I don't feel up to it. What about you two? Come on, confess, you've come here to leave Woodnut with me so that you can go hop around."

"Oh, I'm not the one who should confess," Ruffnut drawled. "You don't want to dance with her because you'd rather see her arse wiggle as she dances with your battle-brother."

"Oi!"

"Don't deny it!" Heather said with a laugh. "We know how honourable you are, but there's no harm in looking at the girl you're going to marry and appreciating the vie- ooohâ|."

"What is it?"

Snotlout blinked as the mood in the table above him changed completely, and suddenly there was a scrambling, scraping noise as Hiccup got onto his feet and got around to the long wooden bench Heather was sitting on.

"You're limping," Fishlegs noticed. "At least a 5 or 6 pain strain, taking your pain tolerance into consideration."

"Not now, Fishlegs," Hiccup replied, and Snotlout found himself sobering up surprisingly quickly as the table's agitation bled down to his prone position underneath it.

"Heatherâ|"

"I'm ok," she said, but it came out as a completely unconvincing whine. "Oh," she nearly sobbed, "I don't want to go to the guest hall without Thuggory, I really don't. I can't take his aunt right now."

"Why don't you come to our hall?" Ruffnut said. "Before idiot over here decided to instigate a verbal spar with me - which he totally lost, by the way - we were coming to say goodnight. Woodnut doesn't like the noise, and if she doesn't sleep soon, neither will we tonight. Come with us and rest there until Thug can join you."

"I may be sick on the way. I may be sick anywhere."

"Eh, I have a baby, woman. I clean her arse. I've seen worse."

It didn't take much more cajoling after that, and Fishlegs helped lever and slide the rather ill-sounding woman out of the bench and then out of the hall. Hiccup sat back down with a sigh after assuring Heather repeatedly that he'd stay there and inform Thuggory right away.

His last words sobered Snotlout up the rest of the way.

"Once Thuggory and Astrid come, I think I'll call it a night, too. I hope she doesn't mind but â€“ the leg isn't being kind tonight."

"Your pain tollerace is over 900." Fishlegs sounded worried and almost fatherly. "No need to feel uncomfortable; if you're saying it hurts, it would probably be at a level where I would be whining in bed about dying."

"And I would be threatening about finishing the job," Ruffnut laughed. "And don't be a stubborn man, let Astrid look at it, she's going to want to and she'll be annoyed enough to open your head like a melon if you drive her nuts with worry that you're hurt, and then don't let her see it. She'll think up all sorts of horrors it could be and drive herself crazy."

"And women and more-crazy shouldn't existâ€“"

The married couple had taken the Meathead wife away after that, still discussing the possibility of Astrid having Beserker blood somewhere in her lineage, but Snotlout's head had cleared and stuck on the single most important thing.

Hiccup, even as a boy, had always kept mum about any aches and pains he had - and who had inflicted them too. Snotlout should know; he would have been grounded his entire life if Hiccup had tattled on how many of his bruises had his cousin's name on them. And it hadn't just been a front, either - Hiccup just â€“ took a hit, absorbed it and move on.

For him to admit that his leg hurtâ€“ Like Fishlegs said, it would probably have reduced anyone else to a weeping puddle of pain.

Snotlout rubbed his eyes, stretching slightly and getting ready to wiggle out from under the table. To be honest, he was also grinning, because he knew he was going to startle Hiccup - hey, teasing his

cousin would never not be entertaining. It was just how he teased him that had changed.

A moment later, a high, lilting voice came from above him, one Snotlout did not know. Hiccup scrambled away suddenly, his bum facing Snotlout as he'd been sitting the wrong way around to look at the dancers shifting urgently to the right. And Snotlout saw another bum - this one very well dressed in a flowing dress dyed red - a shapely bum the burlier Viking would not have minded looking at at all, had she not decided to interrupt his prank. Oh well, he could wait.

"A good evening to you," Hiccup said, stiffly and formally, and it was liking hearing Cattongue again, minus the muffle of the helmet. "How are you enjoying the feast Berk is offering you?"

"Oh, I am enjoying it. So is your promised it would seem, dancing first with another man."

Hiccup bristled - well, Hiccup's bum pristled. Heck, Snotlout's bum bristled. That was not a very nice thing to say at all.

"I do not mind it," Hiccup replied stiffly. "My injury prevents me from dancing, and she's with my battle brother."

"Oh, well, then" there was a very, very pregnant pause, and then the girl started again in a completely different, and much quieter voice. Snotlout had to slide closer to their feet to hear. "Cattongue! Hiccup. Why are you talking to me like we don't know each other?" she asked pleadingly.

"Because I don't know what your father sent you here to do, Sleet." Hiccup's tone was biting, and urgent. The girl shifted, her red dress rustling. "Sleet, it's inappropriate for you to be here too long. I'm alone at this table, you're unmarried and I am promised, so-"

"He wants you to dance with me."

"What?"

"He sent me here, and told me I had to make you dance with me at any cost."

"Sleet, you know I can't, even if my foot didn't hurt, Astrid is-"

"He said-" she was almost sobbing by now, obviously saying the words with reluctance and more than a little fear. Snotlout almost pitied her. "He said that if you don't, he'll he'll cause hell at the meetings tomorrow. He can, Hiccup, you know he can."

Hiccup shifted, going stiff as a board, obviously angry. He made to stand, and the girl - Sleet? - actually threaded her arm in his.

"Let go of me!" Hiccup hissed. "I'm spoken for!"

"Please, please. We used to be friends, Cattongue," she pleaded.

"That was in another time, when I had another role. Sleet, I can't

endanger what I've been waiting for my whol-"

"You know what he'll do to me if I don't go out there with you," and this time, she was sobbing, head down so that no one would see. Snotlout lay there very still; any movement and she would spot him. "Cattongue, please."

There was a very tense silence, and Snotlout realised he wasn't breathing.

"Tell me one thing," Hiccup said tensely. "Does Wolftooth know about this? Or Dogsbreath."

"I â€| I don't think. Two of the other generals were coming in and out of the house frequently, at night, before we left for the Thing. But I never saw the chief or his son. Then again, they could have met them elsewhereâ€| you know I'm only a pawn."

"Did your father need to make an excuse to bring you?"

"What?"

"Your tribe brought no ships. You were the only woman outside the leading family. What did your father say to let you come?"

"He â€| he offered me up as Dogsbreath's mother's companion. So she wouldn't be alone if she ever decided not to come to the talks."

There was another silence.

"Your brother is still a coward, isn't he?"

Someone laughed on the left as apparently an arm wrestling competition had come together. The loud noises helped to drown the tense conversation further, and Snotlout only heard them as he was lying directly under them.

"Yes."

" â€| Very well. Sleet, this is the last time I will ever do you a favour, however. I'm sorry but â€| after this, we can no longer be friends."

"Cattongue, please, I'm only a pawn, I swearâ€|"

"I'm sorry, Sleet. My name is Hiccup Haddock, of Berk. I'm not Cattongue anymore. I have other responsibilities and â€| and I will have a loved one to whom I am going to owe a large explanation."

"A â€| loved one?"

"My betrothed."

"Ohâ€| I thought it was political. I hopedâ€|"

"I'm sorry, Sleet. I've always told you my heart belonged to another; that's her. I waited for her for five years, and she waited for me."

"I â€| I'm sorry."

"You will owe me for this, Sleet. I'm sorry, but our relationship has to be different now, and I'm going to ask you some more questions, during the dance. And after."

"But â€|"

"This is not a game anymore, Sleet. I know he's manipulating you, and you don't have a choice, but this favour I make you is going to be uncomfortable for me."

"Your legâ€|"

"Yes. The song is ending. Let's go."

"But shouldn't you wait for â€| I meanâ€|"

"If I have to look her in the eye and tell her I will dance with someone else, I don't think I will be able to do it. Now come on." He rose with a groan deep in his throat, and he actually tottered for a moment.

They left without another word, and Snotlout stayed lying there, staring up at the knots in the wood above him.

Shit was going down here. Very, very stinky shit. Hiccup was caught in the middle of it.

There was only one thing Snotlout, self-appointed wingman and protector, could do, really.

Snotlout rose - hitting his head on the bench, first, and sobering up the rest of the way before he began crawling out and standing.

He was just on time to see Astrid's face go slack as she spotted what must be Hiccup, with another woman. Snotlout shifted uncomfortably at the sheen that went over her eyes; he'd long realised that Astrid had begun to gravitate towards this arrangement as more than a political match, but to see it so plainly written on her face made him cringe. And the occasion of that revelation was not a happy one. By the custom of their tribes, when someone was married or promised, the first dance would always belong to the betrothed. Hiccup had first sent Astrid out with another man because of his leg, and now he was out there, hopping about, and that excuse was no longer valid. It looked â€| it looked really bad.

Astrid dashed off, and suddenly people started looking around. The Vikings who had taken up the table after Hiccup had left were shaking their head and gossiping. The ones who had bumped into Astrid on her way out were pointing at Hiccup. The people of the other tribes seemed amused, but every single Hooligan had suddenly sprouted a thundercloud on their foreheads.

Shit â€| Hiccup was â€| kinda, sorta offending the tribe, too, wasn't he? Because Astrid was offered to him by the tribe as a future wife, but he'd gone out and danced with another woman - from another _tribe_.

His first instinct was to turn and yell at them - Hiccup hadn't _wanted_ to! He was just being _nice_, because he was Hiccup! Shut them all up, nipping the gossip at the bud.

But there was something beyond fishy about this. Beyond fishy and _dangerous_. The girl had almost sounded like her dad would kill her if she didn't manage to get him in the dancing line.

And weren't the UglyThugs allies? What the _heck_ was going on.

It was why Snotlout decided to approach the Meathhead heir with it. He didn't know if he was doing the right thing, but Hiccup called him his battle brother, so there must have been _some_ trust there.

After sending the man after his wife, Snotlout walked to the dancing line, standing by and waiting impatiently for the song to end. As soon as it did. He bodily yanked Hiccup away from the girl, and away from, he realised, two approaching men who were from the UglyThug tribe. He snarled at them overtly.

"Aha, my poor cousin. You've had too much ale," he said pointedly, glaring daggers at them. "Come, I'll take you home! Never could take your kegs!"

A few people stopped glaring at him as Hiccup stumbled - his leg, probably and nothing to do with the ale - and some began laughing, saying he probably thought it had been Astrid anyway. Snotlout perpetuated the theory with laughter and almost lifted his cousin's slighter weight bodily, getting him out of the Hall doors as fast as their fumbling pace could take them.

As soon as they were outside, Hiccup pushed him off, leaning against one of the statues and almost toppling down the stairs as a cry of agony tore itself from his mouth. Snotlout ignored his cousin's protests and threw one arm over his shoulders, lifting him off the ground slightly. Hiccup's colour kept turning from red to white, cheeks mottled with pain and effort, and it was all Snotlout could do not to curse.

They were half way down when a roar reached their ears, and suddenly a form blacker than the rest of the night landed in front of them.

"Toothless," Hiccup said with some relief. The dragon warbled in obvious worry and agitation, and then turned a hairy-eyeball on Snotlout. "No, bud, he's helping me out. This is just â€œ| the leg." Another warbled, and Hiccup began hopping towards the dragon, taking Snotlout with him as he carefully stepped down step-by-step. "This is not your fault, ok? You were angry with me for not flying with you; you had every right. This didn't happen because you weren't there, ok? It was just â€œ| bad luck. And dancing." The night fury looked unimpressed. "That's right bud, it's all my fault for being a lady-killer; now, do you think you couldâ€œ|"

Snotlout helped him onto the dragon, but Hiccup tugged his hand when he made to move away.

"Do you think we could â€œ| use the tub at your hall? Please, Snotlout."

"But â€œ! Snotlout felt uncomfortable. "You should go find Astrid. Explain; you're good with words, I know you can explain."

"I don't want her to see me like this!" he hissed. "I can't even walk, I can barely stand! Please, Snotlout. I â€œ! I don't think she'll want to see me tonight, either."

Snotlout nodded, and it was an uncomfortable few minutes where he ended up flying on the night fury's backseat, and an awkward few more until the tub was dragged out and filled, and then Hiccup's clothes were shed.

Snotlout wasn't a girl, so he didn't scream when he saw the stump. Instead he swore colourfully.

"Keep it between us," Hiccup said. "It's going to be fine now anyway."

"That doesn't look fine to me!" Snotlout hissed. The sore was red, bleeding and large as a yak's eye. The shorter viking helped his cousin into the tub, and Hiccup swallowed hard as the water, warmed by dragon, hit it. Still turning colours, he looked Snotlout squarely in the eyes.

"Get me a piece of wood."

"What?"

"Wood, for my teeth."

Snotlout started in alarm. "Hiccup, whatâ€œ!"

"Please just do it, Snotlout."

There was no arguing with him when he looked at you with those blazing eyes, Snotlout had come to discover in the last few months. It was like looking at Stoick. With a swallow, he went to look for a hunk of kindling of the appropriate size that wouldn't also leave splinters along his lips, and tried to ignore the conversation going on behind him, where the dragon warbled angrily, worriedly, and mutinously, and Hiccup spoke in both cajoling and pleading tones. The dragon apparently knew what was coming, and didn't like it at all.

"Here," Snotlout finally said, handing him the requested wood. Hiccup nodded and swallowed, inserting it between his teeth and looking at the dragon beseechingly. The black head rested on the tub, looking almost mournful, and after another few seconds he seemed to give up, opening his mouth and letting his tongue hang out.

A drop of dribble descended and fell on his knee. Hiccup jerkily moved his leg so that the next drop of liquid could fall onto the wound.

When it did, Snotlout threw himself forward as Hiccup screamed, his entire body going red and his muscles becoming charded as he grabbed the sides of the tub, knuckles white and body twitching in obvious paroxysms of pain. Snotlout held him by the shoulders as he shook, feeling his stomach threaten to rise to his throat. The wound started

foaming, white and frothing, and Toothless crooned and cooed in obvious distress.

Hiccup's ragged breathing followed, and then, he told the dragon to do it again, and again.

By the time an hour had elapsed, the water was cold, and both men and dragon were exhausted. Hiccup's teeth had left an indentation in the wood, and when Snotlout slipped it out of his mouth, his head almost flopped against his shoulder.

"It was infected, then" Hiccup said, his voice reedy and unsubstantial.

"You have to stay off that," Snotlout said. "You have to stay in your hall tomorrow, and make sure to heal properly, becauseâ€¹"

"Can't do that," Hiccup replied, patting his dragon's nose with a weak, trembling hand. "That's what Madfoot wants, I think. I can't leave dad on his own. They're planning something."

"Yeah, I know." He got a surprisingly sharp look. "I was, sort of â€¹ under your table. I ended up there after the fight with Tuff. Heard it all. Thug knows too, ok?"

"Good," Hiccup said and it looked like the effort of dressing himself was putting him almost into unconsciousness. "I need you to be my eyes and ears. They know you now after you pulled me away, but maybe the people in the village will hear something, and you can bring it to me or dad. Get Tuff to follow Madfoot around. Please, Snotlout â€¹"

"No need to beg, I was made for spying missions," he mock bragged, giving up the effort of standing by and helping his cousin into his pants. "Stay the night, ok?"

"No, it'll look bad. I â€¹"

"I'll be witness, and you can fly Toothless tomorrow to the hall so no one will see you limp."

Hiccup looked too tired to talk. "I can't, I â€¹ Astridâ€¹"

But he was asleep halfway through the sentence.

Snotlout put him on his own bed, sitting guard with the dragon at its foot and scowling at the opposite wall. Something was going on here, and he did not like it. And when Snotlout Jorgensen did not like something, he did something about it.

=0=

1 The title means something on the lines of 'cheers!'

2 These are some of the cultural issues that I was speaking about. Hiccup, as son of the chief, has a number of privileges that he has not really been disillusioned about; even when he was Cattongue, he liked to keep mostly to himself, and therefore was not often in the company of anyone but people of his same actual status. The possession of privacy was a luxury, and one of the hints of the

Haddock's social status in the film, apart from their new, vibrantly coloured clothing with embroidery on it, is the large, large hall and the privacy of your own bedroom. There is little background for the rest of the teens in Hiccup's age group, so I am going with real Viking culture; people had communal baths. Body-shame was not very often practiced, especially when only the members of the family were around, and especially during pre-Christian times. Chastity was obviously very valued, but the idea of 'privacy' hardly existed. Sharing a bed with siblings and cousins was all but inevitable when you had three or four or more nuclear families living under the same roof, and everyone helped out with bathing and washing duties. Thus, the laundry brigades.

3 If you are curious to know how far Hiccup has travelled, or at least how far he has found knowledge about, try to look up the origins of pinky-swearing.

=0=

Because I'm a total and utter evil-overlord. Of course things go South. I can't have them being happy now, can I?

11. Frailty

Round and round the garden, like a teddybear.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 9 - Frailty_

"_**The forest did not tolerate frailty of body or mind. Show your weakness, and it would consume you without hesitation."**_

â€• _**Tahir Shah**_

Stoick had looked on worriedly as Snotlout helped Hiccup to his bed. His son's features were twisted into a grimace, and he really didn't know what to do. He'd been ready to chew him out - more than chew him out - remind him that he was the heir of Berk now, that he had to behave appropriately, that whatever he had done and whatever habits he had acquired during his years away he could not continue them here.

Instead, Snotlout told him tersely that Hiccup had been framed by something or other related to the UglyThugs, and then that he'd been in so much pain that they'd flown him to Snotlout's hall because it was closest and he'd passed out on Snotlout's bed. And the UglyThugs were apparently not to be trusted, his son had said through gritted teeth as he got behind the curtain and Stoick could hear him opening the jar of honey ointment.

"We have to be careful, dad," he'd repeated again and again. "There's something going on, and I think they may spring it on us today. I did

what I could to avoid giving them more ammunition yesterday, but it's obvious that they're not done yet."

"And Hiccup says I can't be brought up as witness till they make a move." Snotlout obviously didn't agree with that, if his scowl said anything.

Then Astrid had walked back in, and things had begun to spark like a blade on a spinning stone. The moment she had opened the door to find Hiccup and Snotlout in front of her, she had gone red, obviously livid.

"Oh look, the adventurous boys of Berk, back to the nest for a kip after your night out on the town." Her tone was acidic and caustic.

Stoick had watched as Hiccup buckled his foot on really quickly, wincing as he watched him tighten it too much and stand too quickly, his sock on the wrong way around.

"Astrid!" He'd hobbled out of his bedding area trying to walk as normally as possible, but she had only sneered at him.

"You can stop the comedy. With the leg I mean; unless you hurt yourself last night with all the dancing."

"No, Astrid, look; I'm sorry. It isn't anything to do with the dancing-"

"It's everything to do with that! It was our first feast as promised! You shamed me in front of the village, in front of the whole tribe! In front of the entire allied clans!"

The door to the hall had been open. Stoick had hated seeing all those people gathering at the foot of the hill in the plaza.

"Astrid, please, you have to let me explain-"

"I'm not listening to anything you have to say!"

"Fine, then let me show you!" he reached down for his prosthetic buckle.

"No, Hiccup. I think you 'showed me' enough." She turned and left, bucket splashing onto the ground as she dropped it. She stopped to take an axe off the wall, unholstering Brisinga and throwing it onto the ground with vindictive force. "You can keep that. I don't want your false promises."

Stoick looked at his son again, sitting beside him. He was still pale; pale enough that even his lips were white, and his eyes still held that haunted look that had taken over the moment that axe had met the floor.

The conversation around them ebbed and flowed; something about sheep, and agreeing on a common time to shear them so that the prices would remain in their control. He had half an ear on it, and he also admittedly knew that his son was listening attentively, despite his sickly-looking face.

Stoick turned his head slightly, exchanging a look with Toothless and Fireworm. Both of them were also looking at his son with frank worry.

The conversation that had followed Astrid's departure hadn't been pleasant either.

"_Son, give her some time to cool off."_

"_What was I supposed to do? Refuse Sleet and risk Madfoot saying I had offended their whole tribe? How can I be sure the other clans will back us up on a claim of personal offense! There would be a duel, could even be a war! Why won't she listen to me? She didn't even give me a moment to explain! Does she not trust me at all?"_

"_Son, look at it from her point of view. You practically jilted her in front of the whole allied tribes."_

"_That's why I wanted to explain! I __**know**__ what it looks like, but doesn't she care to see what it looks like for me?"_

"_I think she cares too much."_

"_Oh, of course. How stupid of me, her telling me that she'll listen to nothing I say is caring. I should have seen that. You know, for once in my life, I'd really like it if you were in __**my**__ corner."_

"_Sonâ€| "_

Hiccup had refused to talk after that, hobbling back to his bed and washing his face and chest, medicating his stump properly and changing into fresh clothing. Then he had apologised; Stoic sighed again, turning to the discussion. Hiccup had become a man while Stoick blinked, and now he realised that he did not know how to help him. The situation was â€| admittedly horrible. Hiccup had been protecting Berk and her needs. He'd been behaving like a good chief and putting the interests of his people even in front of his personal happiness, and gained a spy in the process.

And yet Astrid, who had become like a daughter to him already, was also right. Hiccup had shamed her, had behaved so terribly with her in front of the entire archipelago's worth of Vikings. He had refused her request to dance on their very first feast together, then danced with another woman. To her it must have seemed like he did it with spite, purposefully in her face to tell her what he thought about her dancing offer and their engagement in general.

And â€| he remembered what his son had said about his feelings for the girl, not a few weeks agoâ€|

"Berk will lose a good three weeks of business by then, though," Hiccup spoke up. "Our Spring comes sooner, but then so does our Autumn. We may disrupt the wool's quality if we change the shearing time by that much. I think two weeks is the most we can stretch it."

"It's the same for us," Bile said, rubbing his chin. "And the traders don't come to us as often, with our infested waters. Sure, it will

start getting better with the dragon training now, but I don't see that happening overnight. And with this sea dragon migration, things may get even worse. No, no; I vote for two weeks, too. That should put the shearing date something in the middle for us all, and we can all reach it without leaping."

"Now that is very nice," Madfoot started, and Stoick bristled immediately; the man was unfortunately not speaking out of turn this time, as Bertha had allowed some of her clanswomen generals to give a report on their fishing problems. Stoick could see Hiccup stiffen right away, his already white face going so pallid his freckles stood out terribly.

"You can sit there, speaking with authority about our seasons and our grain and our reserves of food," Madfoot snarled on. "And that's because you've had the luxury of getting to know our islands and our homes on the sly."

Stoick felt his blood run cold. That accusation was â€¢

"Madfoot," Wolftooth said mildly. The man turned to his chief with earnestness on his face that was so poignant it could not be real. Vikings were not known to be good actors.

"Sir, with all due respect," Madfoot started, that humble note in his voice sounding out of place on him, and therefore so obviously false, that Bertha raised an eyebrow. "I think I should voice what everyone is thinking. We have a spy in our midst."

A hushed silence followed that statement as a chill went over the room.

"Oi!" Gobber said, a stand-in for Astrid as (practically) a member of his family beside Spitlout and Hoark.

"Speak for yourself," Bertha suddenly said, her voice a growl. "That thought would never cross my mind."

"It did not?" Madfoot said with so much innocence dripping from his voice it smelt like honeyed mead. "But how is that possible? That boy masqueraded as a nobody, infiltrating our villages, getting to know our customs, our traditions, even our seasons it would seem. Then he comes back to Berk with all that information about our villages, all that information he gained while he was hiding under a false name, and brings it to good use here; having the gall to show his face among us while he does it to our face."

Stoick felt nothing at all for a moment. The amount of nonsense he'd heard at that precise moment, all spun and couched out of context and bastardised to his own ends, seemed to flow over his head at its absurdity.

Then they flowed back, like the waves of the sea passing over the sand again, and sunk in. That's when the blinding, white-hot rage at the insult began to thrum in his veins, his ears pulsing with his blood as he heard nothing but his own overwhelming bloodlu-

A cool hand settled on his elbow and he almost jumped, his shivering perception of the room almost sparking his poorly suppressed urge to take the man's head and introduce it to his knee. He turned to find

it was Hiccup's hand, and the details of the room around him returned as the haze of anger receded slightly.

"I can say that the Meathead clan does not appreciate your insinuations," Thuggory said. Brawlknife had over-indulged last night, and Thuggory was currently his stand-in. Cami had stood and left at the beginning of the meeting, the young lass stating it was in difference to Meathead's numbers, but had asked the other heirs to stay to honour Thuggory's position. He had not understood her logic, but she had been polite about it, and Bertha had not objected.

There was a collective mumble; the Slugsnot and the Trollguts tribes were obviously opting to stay out of it as their suddenly collectively folded arms indicated. The Bog women were all glaring at the UglyThugs as they began to finger their food menacingly. The Meatheads stood staunchly behind Thuggory; however, a few of them were unsure; the man's words, of course, made sense, if you twisted the facts until they soothed his theory.

"Those are some grave accusations," Hiccup said with a mild tone, hand still on his father's elbow as he never took his eyes off Madfoot. "Does your chief share them?"

It almost felt like pride had turned into a morning star and hit him in the chest with its iron-heavy, spiky ball. Just like his Hiccup; smart at the head and at the mouth, diving right to the heart of the matter. Bertha looked slyly around at her tribe, narrowed and eying Wolftooth like a nightmare eyed a fish in a jar.

And Stoick didn't want to look around at all the generals of Berk. He knew all they needed for war-cries to start going up was to make equally enraged eye-contact.

"I do not presume to know what you had in mind when you chose to take on a different name," Wolftooth said carefully, body deceptively relaxed as his eyes carefully assessed the room. "But I would of course hope that there was nothing at all that would damage the allied clans among your intentions."

Slimy, venomous, slipperyâ€|

"You of course presume correctly," Hiccup replied with an equally calm body language and smile, turning his words against him. "I would never dare endanger our treaty. My decision to travel under a false name was to see, purely, whether I could make it."

Stoick held in a wince; that wasn't even a lie, either. His son had been trying to learn his way in the world outside his tribe. It was the motivation that was left up to the other tribes' assumption. They thought it was a coming-of-age adventure. Hiccup had merely been trying to survive.

"It would have been easy to make my way across the various tribes of Berk's allies, being treated as an honoured guest as son of an allied chief. But then what challenge or hardship would that be? And what if I was followed by enemies of Berk and captured, putting a strain on my clan if a ransom is demanded?" Hiccup shook his head. "It was the only possible solution. Not to mention that, as an outsider, I was never allowed into Council unless I could give a direct input on the dragons and always asked to leave right after. It was the safest

solution, for everyone."

His son had obviously thought this through. He was certainly very glad that Snotlout had not managed to convince his son to stay off the leg that morning; Stoick was an old hand at this, but he would have started a war by taking a mutton hip-bone to the man's head when he'd finished saying those words. And he was also terribly, terribly proud.

"Although now, there is of course the problem posed by insult," Hiccup went on with the same nonchalant tone.

"It is true!" Madfoot replied, looking gleeful, and Stoick looked at his son with disappointment blooming quickly on the heels of pride as the other man continued. "You practically forced my daughter out to dance with you last night, drunk as you were. No doubt your lustful ways while you were 'Cat tongue the Reticent' could pass under our noses, but not anymore now!"

"You misunderstand," Hiccup replied with a smile that did not reach his eyes, and Toothless suddenly began growling, as if picking a cue from his friend. Stoick looked back at him. Hiccup, however, did not; he did not even raise a hand to calm the dragon at all. "I meant the insult incurred to me, as heir to my tribe, by you, a general of yours."

Again there was silence in the hall as the statement made everyone hold their breath, the dragon growls resounding around the table. Gobber looked as red in the face as he must be, if his burning ears were any indication, and the anger in him barely kept at bay had any outward sign. Bertha looked like her birth anniversary had skipped a few weeks and come early.

Wolftooth suddenly looked very, very tense, eyes wide and completely, for once, taken by surprise.

"You have insinuated that I was spying on your clans, without proof and without provocation," Hiccup said, still smiling pleasantly.

"Even when I have not, as you say, used any information against you in these talks; anyone here who has travelled by sea knows the whims of the season well enough not to drown. Of course, the usual course of action would be a duel." The subsonic rumble of the night fury's growl deepening in pitch, making his bones rattle. Fireworm's tones joined in, and soon, all the other dragons in the hall save a few were growling. Stoick tried to calm Fireworm, and others followed, but all the dragons refused to subside. "Of course, that would be rather superfluous. I would not be able to fight you, with my current physical condition."

"Yet you danced with my daughter, yesterday!" he replied, face suddenly puce.

"I was, of course, only doing your daughter an honour last night, in name of our old friendship. I knew she had tied her heart to a poor blacksmith, and when she found out my status, she thought there may have been a possibility, and I put the matter to peace. I incurred the anger of my beloved to do her that honour, too."

"Do not try to fool me, boy," Madfoot snarled. Stoick realised with rising satisfaction that he had rapidly lost control of his temper,

and the situation. "Your arrangement with the Berk lass is political."

"And not less valid." Hiccup actually shrugged. Madfoot's scowl twisted into a more horrid mask of his features. "Besides, since when have arranged marriages prevented the involved from growing together?"

"There was no growing to be heard this morning," Madfoot said savagely, despite Woolftooth's sudden motion to cut him off, "when she was screaming her disdain for you for all to hear."

Hiccup shrugged again; if the comment effected him as badly as Stoick suspected, he didn't let on except from a slightly paler face. The thrum of dragon growls in the room, however, rose to a fever pitch. Every single hair on Stoick's arm stood standing straight enough to ache.

"She was angry. Astrid's is my betrothed just the same, and so she will remain. I will not be jeopardised with an unwanted relationship when my first priority is still towards Berk."

"You will not appease honour, then, and become engaged to Sleet? You would chose a fisherman's daughter over mine; daughter of a general!" Madfoot said, looking suddenly insane.

Bertha had to laugh at the audacity, looking at the plum-coloured man with eager eyes as she tried to light the flame under his oil. "Come now, he danced with her; hardly bent her over a table in the hall and had her in front of the entire assembly."

Madfoot's mouth began working maniacally.

"There is only one solution to this, then!" he yelled, standing up. Half the hall stood too, everyone fingering anything that could count as a weapon, as proper ones were left outside to avoid bloodshed if things got heated.

Like right now.

The dragons behind Stoick started snarling, their growl turning into a tooth-showing, eye-slitted look of murder.

"Of course," Hiccup replied before Madfoot could wrestle his mouth to talk with so many blood-hungry eyes looking his way. "You may as well kill me now. As I have already said, I am in no condition to duel with anyone."

Hiccup's nonchalant tone and blank face left everyone speechless, and Stoick almost felt like he were suddenly sitting in someone else's head, watching it all happen. His son had not just proposed his own death to a man who obviously wanted him dead; not his smart Hiccup. This had to be some bizarre dream. Nightmare; this was a nightmare.

Hiccup blinked, then turned to Toothless and Fireworm as if he realised that they were growling for the first time. He looked his dragon in the eye, holding his gaze wordlessly and without even a gesture, Toothless backed down. Fireworm followed, and soon, the other dragons.

Hiccup turned to Madfoot once again, looking at him with an almost bored expression. The contrasting silence rang in all their ears.

"Well?" he said. Madfoot's face twisted in fury again.

"Now hang on," Bile suddenly said. "You can't go and do that. You've all been shushing these beasties for nothing, and he does it with a look. I want the training promised to my tribe! Not to mention, there's no insult but the one in your mad head in this matter - and he has more claim to insult than you do!"

"Oh, aye, from us," Footsore also said. "There won't be a-fair, that, if you all get the dragons and we're cheated out of our chance. And the boy's right, no insult was made. Only incurred."

"And it was not the only one," Stoick finally said, his voice a barely restrained growl almost mirroring the dragon's earlier vocalisations. "My son," he said with emphasis, making sure to extend a hand and curl it around a still-too-bony shoulder. "Informed me that he would have eventually travelled to all the tribes to teach about his discovery with dragons, but unfortunately was unable to."

"Ah, I'd wondered why you didn't fly our way, lad," Bile said. Hiccup gave him a smirk.

"Eh. My journey was 'cut short', " he said in his usual, Hiccup-y tone. Bile blinked at him, and then half the tension in the room dissipated into snorts. "Ah, sorry, that was rather wrong footed."

A few slices of bread (and a few plates) flew Hiccup's way. Bertha shook her head at him. Hiccup merely smiled more comfortably.

"Still," Stoick continued, trying to regain control of the room with only a slightly reproachful look at his son. "There is the question of why you did not share your knowledge with us. It could, of course, be taken as a violation of the treaty, if any more hostile behaviour were to occur."

"The Meatheads thought we'd get used to the change first. And we honestly assumed you would all know, eventually," Thuggory said with a shrug. "Cattongue had been speaking about moving South; he would have probably come through Berk for Hopeless and Trollguts Islands if nothing had gone as it did."

A blatant lie; Hiccup had told Stoick everything of his visits to the allied islands. However, he had also stressed that the heirs had been nothing but friends - good, solid friends. This lie proved it. Stoick nodded to Thuggory to show he understood; he had probably rehearsed that with Hiccup earlier when they were whispering in a corner with Cami. Bertha snorted when he made eye contact with her.

"What he said," she replied irreverently. "Though we also thought that we women would look too menacing to you lot of male pussies if you found we had dragons. We were saving you white hairs."

"We were not aware that you did not know," Woolftooth said, and then

with a swallow, continued. "Though I can see how it makes us look particularly bad. I also agree that no insult was incurred by my general's daughter; instead we rather owe young Astrid compensation. Sit down, Madfoot." The man had been about to speak again. "I think your household needs to make amends to the promised of the future chief, don't you think?"

Madfoot's face began to twist wordlessly again.

"Hiccup, do you have any preferences?" Wolftooth said. Hiccup tilted his head.

"Perhaps, Dogsbreath would be inclined to take Sleet under his tutelage for the dragons," Hiccup said in a mild tone. The girl would be protected. And Dogsbreath would have a spy at his hip. "For Astridâ€œ I would like to deal with the domestic matter internally, if you do not mind."

Wolftooth gave him a piercing look. Hiccup was also manipulating him in this by putting his son in the middle of it. But as he'd offered; he could hardly refuse.

The session ended with no further incident. As soon as it was done, Gobber rose, saying something about speaking to a lass, and Hiccup rose after him, trying surreptitiously to make his limp disappear by resting on his dragon. Thuggory quickly flanked him on the other side, like a true battle brother, and pretended to finalise the sheep shearing issue while holding his elbow. Hiccup was right; a true battle brother, that one.

By the end of that memorable meeting, however, his son had gained something more. Stoick's ears sharpened as his son's name changed before his eyes. 'Hiccup the Red Death's bane' had suddenly become 'Hiccup the Negotiator'. Stoick smiled. That was certainly a name he could get behind.

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Cami growled at the knot in the wood holding her mace fast. This mace was precious. This was Macey, first sweet, destructive gift from Tuff, and it was not going to remain stuck on Berk in a tree.

She planted her foot up and tugged with all her body weight, then screamed when it wouldn't budge. She fell off, leaping off her back and beginning to kick the tree furiously.

"Someone give me an axe! This one doesn't know what's coming to it!"

"I'm not giving you mine, it's my only good one," Astrid said with a scowl.

"I want my Macey back," Cami snarled, still looking at the stuck weapon and trying to figure out how to pry it away. She huffed. "Tuff gave me that. I'm not letting the tree keep it."

"Humph. A Bog woman, mooning over a weapon given by a man," Astrid replied acidly. "What would your ancestors say."

Cami turned on her, advancing until they were nose-to-nose.

"Say that again," Cami hissed in her face. Astrid was somewhat taller, but that didn't mean Cami was any less intimidating, or would allow herself to be stood over. She shoved Astrid's shoulder, sizzling for a fight.

"Boys, boys, your weapons are both pretty," Heather said with a tired voice and an eyeroll. She was sitting at the foot of another tree a short distance away, swathed in blankets and still looking somewhat green, and very much annoyed.

"And you're going to wake my gas-monster," Ruff said in her usual hoarse drawl, "She loves a good fight, but then she will fuss because she had to wake up to watch it."

"Then tell little miss butt-hurt over here to shut up. Just because she's an idiot, doesn't mean we all have to be."

"Who did you call an idiot!" Astrid said, standing even taller and obviously also raring to go to beat something up.

"You!" Cami said, whirling on her and taking out her bludgeon. Astrid pulled a shield up just in time to block the blow, and Cami felt a savage thrill as she watched the wood and metal vibrate. They'd brought all this stuff out here to vent steam; she was going to vent steam.

"And look who's a black, black pot," Astrid hissed at her, bracing against the wet grass and pushing her back. Cami didn't stay unbalanced for long as Astrid swung the shield at her, aiming to bruise and knock-out. So she ducked and swiped at Astrid's legs, who hopped and tumbled to the other side of the clearing. They began to circle one another.

"Oh Frigga, worse than the men, sometimes," Heather said.

"You're only sorry you can't join in," Ruff commented, cradling her daughter.

"Same as you," Heather piped back. Cami smirked along with them. Astrid, on the other hand, snarled.

"You find this all funny, don't you?" she said, "all so very funny when it's someone else who's the butt of a joke. But let's see how you like it." Astrid rushed her, using her shield as a ram and spinning quickly when Cami moved. "Wait; you don't," she went on provocatively. "The moment your chosen little boy-toy was taken, you lost your cool completely."

"Boy-toy," she hissed. "Is that how you view men, Hofferson? It's no wonder you have such little respect for Hiccup."

Astrid yelled a wordless cry and rushed her again, red and livid. Cami bolted to the side and took her down with a trip-up. Astrid rolled and slammed her hip with the sharp corner of the shield, making Cami grunt and catch Astrid's shoulder with a good bludgeoning. The protective padding rang with the blow, caving slightly inwards.

"Respect!" Astrid hissed, leaping back and rotating her shoulder.

"What respect does he deserve! And look at you, a proud Bog Woman defending men like they're your heroes!"

"Just because we think they're a bunch of pussies doesn't mean we don't respect them." She sprinted and turned, waiting for Astrid to brace her shield before shifting on her heel to make good use of her shorter height and catching Astrid across the back with her weapon. The other girl fell forward with a groan, but growled on. "And the first thing we learn to know is which men are worth it, and which men aren't."

Cami kicked Astrid as she got back up, rolling her to face the sky and then stepping on her shield, pinning the girl down with her own weapon.

"You're lucky Macey's stuck in that tree. Otherwise Hiccup would be mourning you for what you've said."

"Mourning," Astrid spat, still snarling.

"Yes, mourning." Cami spat down into the grass, angry beyond all measure and belief. "I could really kill you right now, you stupid woman."

"Go ahead and do it!" Astrid hissed.

"Yo, you twoâ€|"

"Heyâ€|"

"Don't tempt me!" Cami yelled, feeling her hand ITCH around her bludgeon to cave that stupid face in. "You have everything I want!"

"What?" Astrid suddenly bucked her off, rolling up to her feet and snarling. "You're another one of Hiccup's many conquests now, too?"

"Oh Freyr, keep my hand from slaying this ignorant being!" Cami yelled to the sky, tripping her up again and trapping her in the same position. "Why the hell would I ever want Hiccup! He's been after you for as long as I can remember!"

Astrid seemed to falter, and Cami took vicious, cruel pleasure in driving the nail home.

"But nooo, you were always more interested in other things. Every time we came here for a Thing, you were the serious-faced wet-blanket, cold as an ice-giant in the Winter! And every time Hiccup spoke of you, it was always about how much you trained, how much you worked, how much you ignored him." Cami smiled at her with absolutely no mercy, feeling her own heart-ache take satisfaction in causing it to another.

She wasn't a nice person. She was a Bog Burglar. She wasn't a nice person at all.

"And now here he is, a beautiful man, with women on all sides of the archipelago wanting a piece of him, and now you notice him." Cami's disdainful glee, vindictive and sharp, only grew as she saw

Astrid's face twisting and contorting in pain that reflected her own. "Why would he want you, is a better question? Why would he even want the stupid, unremarkable warrior woman when he can have daughters of chiefs and generals?"

Astrid's face was growing paler by the minute. Cami took a savage satisfaction from it.

"I'll tell you why, since you seem to be too stupid to figure it out." Cami bore down on her, putting more of her weight onto the shield and Astrid's twisted arm, smiling with all the horrid, gleeful, vengeful and jealous malice she felt. "Because he cares for you. A great deal - for a long time. You were all he could speak of when we were children, and he never looked at any of the other women who tempted him. He cares for you the same way I care of my Tuff."

She reared her hand and slapped her.

"But what would you know? You're so lost in your little world of feeling sorry for yourself that you wouldn't notice even if he told you in plain words. And here you are, just as proud and as cold as an ice-giant as you used to be. Did you let him tell you why he danced with someone else, yesterday? I'll bet you didn't even give him a moment to speak." Cami spat at the grass again.

"He practically jilted me," Astrid replied. But this time Cami at least had the satisfaction of hearing the other woman's voice tremble. There; she didn't deserve to be spiteful and angry. She had no reason to be spiteful and angry.

"You don't know what jilting is." Cami looked her dead on. "All the problems that you have with him you're creating yourself. Step out of your head and your expectations for a moment and look and listen, and maybe you'll be able to see that you're the only woman he's ever looked at. He had a reason for stepping out with that lass last night. Did you stop to think about it, before you decided it was about you?"

Astrid sighed, going limp under the shield, and Cami let up, moving her foot off and stepping back. Astrid sat up, looking like she'd taken more of a beating than she actually had.

"You're wrong," she said quietly, and Cami stepped forward to really bludgeon her head in this time. "There was another woman, and I think he still loves her. Her name is Sepha â€‘ he kept calling her when he was delirious from his wound."

Cami stopped cold, staring at the girl. This, she hadn't known. Still, what she knew outweighed anything this girl had made up as consolation for her own imaginary injuries.

"How do you know it's a woman? How do you know it's not the weird arse name of a man? Heck, it could be the name of a dragon for all you know!" Astrid blinked up at her. Cami realised that she'd struck the nail on the head. "You don't know! You're just assuming! By the gods, I thought you were a fierce warrior, not a sappy, cowering little milk-maid! Corner him and ask if you have to know! But know one thing."

Cami grabbed her by the tunic and hauled her up; shorter or not, she was too strong right now in her anger.

"You are lucky, luckier than you can imagine. The man you want is tied to you, and he wants to be tied. If you don't think so, go face him and ask! You want to know what jilting is, stupid girl?" She threw her back, and Astrid managed to keep her balance barely. "There was an understanding between Tuff and I. There are letters that can be brought up against me in allied clan councils. Tuff gave me gifts and I did the same. But now his family have tied him off to someone else, and for me, that's it."

Cami knew she was yelling, and knew she was huffing, and knew that her eyes were stinging but she ignored it. She was too occupied staring this stupid woman down, who had everything and was throwing it away.

"Bog women don't marry. But the chief and her heir do. We marry men we choose from our allied tribes; we were too frightening and too powerful for those poor little trembling willies some fifteen generations ago, so they decided to make the marriage a condition for the peace treaty. And it's fine, the kids are considered legitimate by all the tribes that way, and no one can contest any loophole bullshit. Of course, there's a catch."

Cami got into Astrid's face again, holding up a finger. "We get one try. One. If that try to snag a man doesn't work, we can't make another one. And like I said, there's - there was an understanding between Tuff and I, and more than enough evidence to prove it." She shoved her again. "So don't you come here whining about being jilted."

With that, huffing like a bull, Cami kicked a clod of earth and turned, heading away from them all to go â€œ kill something.

"Hey."

Apparently Astrid liked offering herself to be murdered. Astrid, instead, threw her axe into the tree next to Cami's mace, missing it by a few inches and embedding it beside the pointy weapon.

Cami blinked at her. Then she turned to look at the tree, both weapons stuck fast, the axe vibrating from the blow and making the mace beside it quiver almost in sympathy. Then there was a crack, and Macey fell out with a thunk.

"Maybe we both need an ally," she said. Cami blinked. Then tilted her head.

"Are you offering â€œ?"

"Yes," Astrid shrugged. "And I â€œ I apparently need all the help I can get."

"You always have," Ruff drawled again behind them, and Cami started, she and Astrid turning to look at the two satisfied looking women. Fuck them, and their husbands, and their pretty daughters. "You've had your head stuck up your arse for so long you can't find your way out again."

"Humph," Astrid replied, folding her arms.

"If you got your head off training for five minutes back then, you'd have known what everyone else did," she continued to taunt.

"What Astrid said counts for us, too, Cami," Heather added, shoving some blankets off to put a palm on Ruff's shoulder. The taller blonde rolled her eyes, but rocked her child and nodded. "If us women don't help each other, no one will."

"And we should totally let Astrid's mother in on it." Ruf's grin became evil. "That woman is pure genius, sometimes. As for Tuffâ€|" She sneered. "They made me promise I wouldn't tell, not that I wouldn't help. I totally cut ties with the clan now. Count me in."

"Then it's decided," Cami said. She turned onto the rest of them. "Hiccup's already working on something, or so he said. But â€|" she shrugged. "If you're all offering, I'm taking you up on it. Betray me and you die, of course, but I still appreciate it." She gave Astrid a wooly eye. "And you, go talk to your man. Other woman or not, he's yours now, and if you want him, then keep him that way. You've gotta take care of these poor sod males, or they wander off, get lost, and then whimper like a blind pup for a teat."

"Hear hear," Ruff and Heather said at once, sharing a wry, knowing look.

"Though I'll wager," Ruff went on, "If you offer Hiccup your teat, Astrid, there won't be any whining to speak of."

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1 A morning star is a weapon of this period comprised of a stick, at the end of which is a chain, at the end of which is a solid iron ball covered in spikes. It is the best melee weapon that humanity has ever created, and if anyone wants to court me, they can totally sod the flowers and get me a morning star. I'd get a lady boner right away.

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And Astrid gets a reality check. She may also want to check for concussion. Meanwhile, in politics landâ€|

12. Spaces Between

Someone finally realises that talking may be a good idea.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 10 - Spaces
Between_

**[F]orgiveness doesn't happen all at once. It's not an event - it's a process ... It sneaked up on you. It happened in the small spaces between thoughts and in the seconds between ideas and blinks.**

â€• _**Barry Lyga**_

Astrid walked into the hall later that night, the sun gone down and the biting cold driving everyone in their right mind indoors.

Stoick was already there, looking worn and almost feeble despite his stocky build remaining unchanged. Astrid hazarded a smile as she closed the door behind her with some effort. There were strong winds, tonight, from North East.

Stoick didn't say anything, and with that beard she couldn't be sure if he returned her smile. With a sigh, she began to take her armour off, scowling at the damaged shoulder pad and wondering if she dared use it as an excuse to speak with him.

Him being â€|

Her foot hit something on the ground and her chest jolted, remembering the cruel things she'd said and done that morning. She bent down, collecting the axe and looking at it in the firelight. There were no nicks in the blade, thankfully, and she brushed off any dust that clung to the beautiful polished iron. Her face was reflected back between the blackened patterns and runes; Cami was right. She had assumed so many things about Hiccup in the last few weeks, some good, some not so good. Perhaps, it was time she put on her big-girl-britches and face him. And then maybe, the sad look in his eyes that she was seeing reflected at her would go away.

She put the axe reverently back on its hooks, feeling guilt and regret flood her again as she remembered his face just before she'd left this morning. Throwing the axe away like that had been impulsive, and angry, and an attempt to match him blow-for-blow. He'd hurt her, so she would hurt him. With a sigh she turned back towards the room, trying to gauge Stoick's mood before she spoke.

"Is Hiccup stillâ€|" she bit her lip, hating how everything she thought to ask somehow sounded accusatory. She wasn't going to ask if he was still out, not after what she had said that morning. "I want to apologise," she said, putting her best foot forward. Stoick was definitely smiling, but there was something in his eyes, a fatigue that spoke of more than the usual daily toil. He nodded towards the curtain, and a serpent of worry coiled around her innards. "Is he alright?"

"He had a long day," he replied, the same note of deep weariness on his face mirrored in his voice. Astrid nodded, moving towards the curtain with some hesitation and sparing Stoick a last glance before she ducked behind the drape into Hiccup's sleeping area.

Hiccup was lying on the bed, clothes only half removed. His long lashes fanned across his cheeks, paler than usual, and the blanket thrown only on his knees.

A feeling bloomed in her chest, stronger than usual. It had been born during the time when Cat tongue had been running around the island, trying to save them from themselves. It had grown, more and more insistent, hungrily eating up more space in her mind and chest as it greedily drank in every detail of his behaviour, from the way his nose scrunched when he frowned in frustration, to how his throat bobbed when he laughed; always too hard, with his head thrown back.

She moved towards the bed as quietly as she could, picking some of his things off the ground and putting them on his shelves, then sitting on the edge of his bedding, looking at him.

He was breathing deeply, sleeping the sleep of the exhausted with his hair standing on end and getting everywhere. It was growing too long, his lighter strands a shade of red-brown that she was beginning to find enticing. And she had no problem admitting that she found him handsome; he had become a tall, thin man, where before he had been a weed of a boy. He'd never developed the bulk his father had, and yet, she couldn't hide from herself that winding her limbs around his wiry strength and clinging had been the subject of more than one â€œ interesting dream.

Astrid sighed again, allowing herself live this moment as she let everything else melt away. Yes; she was hurt. Yes; she had every right to be. However, Cami was also right - it could be so much worse. She could have lost him during those 5 years, she could have lost him to the poison in his leg wound. If he did not want her, because he loved another, she would still let him choose, she'd promised him that, but it would be an error she would never forgive herself for if she lost him because she hadn't tried.

Because she was afraid.

She could admit it, now, after being faced with the situation Cami was in, so much worse than her own. She was afraid - afraid of being hurt, because this feeling that had grown in his chest clung to his every word, making everything he said and did seem like the most important part of her day. She was even afraid of the feeling itself; of the dependence and the need to be near him. She was used to taking an axe in hand and attacking her problems head on, yet this one seemed so large and unsolvable - and what was she going to do, take an axe to her own chest? But Cami was right, too. Astrid was a fighter, not a whiny little barmaid. If he didn't want her, she would fight for him; and looking back, all the things she had decided where clues to his distaste for her were wobbly at best.

She could not help carding her hand through his hair, trying to bring it away from his face. The blanket was caught under his weight and she sighed at it, looking helplessly at his half-naked form thrown haphazardly on the bedding.

"Astalâ€œ" he mumbled, and her breath caught, her heart picking up. Her first instinct was to frown and hide the reaction, but she stamped that down. When she saw his eyes twitch and his nose scrunch, she let herself greet him with a smile when he blinked awake.

"Sorry I woke you," she whispered. His eyes blinked up at her again, tired beyond thought for a second before he began to wake up completely. "I wanted to help you get under the covers."

He frowned at her, then, and looked away, and she bit her lip.

"Hiccup, look. I also wanted to apologise." She let her hand run through his hair again and his eyelids began descending.

"I need to apologise too," he muttered, his voice thick with sleep. When he didn't push her away, she sat more comfortably on his bed, still threading her fingers in the soft reddish hair.

"I need to apologise for more," she said decidedly. Bringing her palm down to his cheek she turned his head to face her. "I'm sorry," she said clearly. "I over-reacted. I was angry, and I was hurt, but I shouldn't have said any of that." He looked at her searchingly, his green eyes almost glowing in the muted light of the fire filtering through the curtain. "And I love that axe," she continued quickly when he didn't say anything. "I'm sorry I did that, too."

Hiccup looked at her for a moment more, then one of his hands threaded in her own hair, and he glanced at her in askance until she tilted her head into his touch. A corner of his mouth turned upwards, and his eyes seemed to look at her with chagrin.

"I you were hurt?" he asked, his eyebrows coming down. "I didn't want to do that. It was the last thing I wanted to do. I really wanted to share that feast with you, Astrid. I'm sorry things turned out the way they did." She couldn't stop her eyes from looking away, a sliver of doubt still bubbling to the surface inside her. Yeah, sure, she could doubt. But she steeled herself. She'd beat him up until he stopped making her doubt, then. "May I do you want to hear why?"

His tone was tentative, and when she looked up again, his face had changed into a mask of trepidation.

"Go on," she told him, bringing his palm down with both her hands and resting her cheek in it.

He swallowed; she couldn't help watching the movement of his throat and wishing she could kiss it. "My leg really was hurting. I had a" he sighed, biting his lip. "I had a vague idea of just sitting there and watching you dance all night." He gave her one of his wry smirks, and she snorted, answering with a look. "I wouldn't have minded too much," he mumbled, looking away and blushing. Astrid rubbed her cheek against his palm again and his fingers twitched, brushing her ear shell and making all the skin down her neck and back warm. "Ah, er, anyway. Sleet asked me for a favour. Her father is he is an unpleasant man, Astrid. She said he threatened to cause hell in the meeting today!" He paused, as if a sudden thought had arrested him, and then he pouted almost irresistibly. "Not that it made much difference," he mumbled rebelliously, and she had to stop herself from kissing his puckered lips. Cami knew what she was talking about; he was an idiot, in that he didn't know what he did to her.

"Your father was right about your attention span, at least," she said teasingly, and he blushed. "Is that why you're so tired? This Madfoot business?" she asked, moving closer to him to look at his face in the

sparse light, the dark circles under his eyes obvious even then against his milk-white skin. "You should sleep. We can talk tomorrow."

"No, look- no." The hand in her hair stiffened as he moved his fingers to the back of her head. "Astrid, I need to say this. And if you - I mean, whatever you decide to do with us after I do, I will accept it. But please, will you listen to me?"

She nodded, twin emotions of trepidation and excitement rising in her chest

"I â€| You â€| you are important to me, Astrid," he said, swallowing and tensing underneath her. "Even without the, um, engagement. Without the contract. You would be important to me. I would- I care for you. Very, very much."

Astrid blinked down at him, her eyes attracted to the fluttering pulse on his neck oscillating frantically like a trapped bird. His eyes were wide and his lip white around his tooth.

It was her turn to swallow and she rolled her shoulders, remembering the pain in Cami's eyes and giving herself courage from it. "You've â€| you've grown to be important to me too," she replied, and she was too flooded in the moment to worry about how much her voice trembled. "Very important." 2

"... Seriously?" he asked, his tone unmistakably, incredulously hopeful, and it took a weight off her chest. It brought a bubble of relief up her ribcage, which burst as a chuckle through her lips before she could stop it.

"Yes," she replied. She looked at him for a while, finally feeling as if they had arrived at a point where they were both speaking the same language after weeks and weeks of talking through water. His face split into an answering smile, and it was as if the sun had come up early.

"I â€|" he smiled helplessly, then, looking at her with naked happiness that flowed over her skin like warm water, leaving her feeling a glow of an entirely different nature to any kind of external warmth she'd felt before. Her own heart had picked up speed, hammering against her chest with more feelings of elations blooming in pockets around her lungs. She sat back, and gently punched his shoulder.

"Ow,"

"Wuss," she chuckled.

"I â€| your wuss," he said, his voice taking on a daring tone, and her eyes widened. Oh, Hiccupâ€|

"Yes, my wuss," she affirmed, her heart pounding. "And don't you forget it." His smile widened.

"I wouldn't dare go against a warrior of Freya's 'd turn me to mince and feed me to the pigs," he said, his tone teasing but his eyes earnest. She then leaned down to kiss his cheek; once, twice, three times.

"The punch was for hurting me," she said in his ear. "The, um, kiss was for saying â€| all that."

He smiled at her, his face beaming, and he leaned forward to kiss her cheek in turn. His scratchy chin against her ear made her twitch back with a laugh, her shoulder coming up to rub against her neck. He only kept looking at her with shining eyes; he had never looked more beautiful.

"So," she said, taken aback by that last thought as her mind suddenly took a dive down the path where his skin was against hers, their sweat mingled and his body pulsed inside her. "Um, ahem, that leg. When can I see itâ€|?"

He frowned right away, but then shook his head, and smiled again.

"Not tonight? Please. I don't want to get out of bed again," he said, his voice ending on a pleading note. She nodded, backing off right away.

"Alright. But I get to see that leg. Later. Right?" She didn't want to hide this from him, so she said it. It seemed worth it, somehow, to admit all this. "I'm worried about you. I want to keep you safe, and healthy. And with me."

Hiccup's mouth fell open. Then he frowned again, looking away and scrunching his face in thought. His mouth opened and closed a number of times, but he never said anything. It almost seemed like he was making a tough decision.

"Later," he finally said decidedly, with a nod that was evidently more to punctuate whatever decision he'd made inside that confusing, alluring mind.

"Later," she sighed, leaning in to rest her head against his chest. His heart picked up under her ear, and then settled down again into a soothing rhythm,

"Astrid?" he asked tentatively, his voice vibrating against her ear, sounding so deep and sonorous that she could feel her tension melting from her shoulders.

"May I stay?" she asked, with all the courage she could muster. She was suddenly seized by the undeniable, overwhelming desire to sleep, exactly as she was, and the fear that he would refuse.

"I â€| we hadn't finished? I mean I hadn't told you everything," he said in a whisper she found all too seductive all of a sudden. The skin on her neck and back puckered at the imagined brush of his breath, and she shivered. "And you're cold, ahâ€|"

Astrid sighed; stubborn, stubborn man. She pushed off his chest to look at him with fatigued eyes. He looked worried and cringed when raised a hand, and it made her snort.

"Don't you forget it," she repeated in a fond whisper as she cupped his cheek. "Now tell me. I'm listening."

"Wellâ€| ok," he said with a tentative smile. "Ok. Sleetâ€| that's Madfoot's daughter. He's an awful man, Astrid. He raises a hand at everyone; his wife, his children. I saw him beat his dog, once. And his dragon." He looked suddenly fiery, eyes blazing at the injustice of it, and Astrid felt that feeling in her chest bubble higher. Yes; this man was important to her. There was no shame in having admitted it. He was worth it; he was worth anything. "And when I used to go to the UglyThug clan as Cat tongueâ€|" He cringed. "Don't be angry at me. I never meant anything by it."

"Uh oh," she said breathily, steeling herself. Had this poor girl been one of his conquests, the ones she and Ruff often wondered about? "Go on," she said anyway.

"She used to hide in the forge." He still looked apologetic and chagrined. "I never really saw her as â€| but she kind of started to care for me. As â€| more than friends." He shrugged and looked away, apparently too uncomfortable to keep eye-contact. "I never encouraged her, I swear. Heck, at the time I couldn't anyway, I was just a blacksmith." He shrugged again, and something jolted inside Astrid, half-remembering something her mother had said but too distracted by the way his chin moved as he nibbled his lip to try to remember. "Anyway, her father sent her as bait. He wanted her to dance with me. If I hadn't, she would have â€|" he winced. "I saw what he can do to her. Her eye was swollen for a week, once."

And outrage suddenly made her snarl. How _dare_ he.

"Yeah," Hiccup said, face twisted in distaste and lips bundled under his scrunched nose. He was too much to resist, then. She leaned down and kissed him, lingeringly. His lips against hers opened in a gasp, but she didn't dare, though the temptation alone made her blush and warm; warmer still when he responded, his eyes falling shut as he pressed his lips against her own. The breath from his nose ghosted over her cheek, and she shivered again, suddenly very aware of the contours of his hard body against hers.

"You're cold," he said slowly against her lips. She pulled away, and he looked like he was kicking himself. She smiled and kissed his nose.

"You're forgiven," she answered, and his face lit up in a whole new way again. She was discovering that she loved being able to make his face contort in so many ways simply by kissing him and being close and speaking. "And I'm sorry."

"I â€| thank you. I, um, really. It means a lot."

"Yes, for me too," she said leadingly, and he looked adorably clueless for a second, and then blinked.

"Oh, oh, yes, of course you're forgiven." He shrugged. "I can't stay mad at you when you kiss me like that."

"Good weapon to know of," she replied cheekily, and then he rolled his eyes in mock resignation.

"Asâ€|" he swallowed. "Astrid?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you." She blinked at him, her turn to be confused.

"What?"

"For coming here. Giving me giving me a chance. To explain. Giving me a chance to explain." He looked at her for a few more seconds, nailing her with his eyes as he seemed to think hard about something. "I want to er, um. Um ...ah." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I think I I!" he let the breath out, seeming to resign himself. "You can stay. I mean, I want you to - no, wait, I mean, I'd really like - no, no, not like that!" He slapped a hand across his eyes, and Astrid bit her lip to hold a giggle back.

"Good night," she said. She rose slightly, and he looked up at her in dismay before she tugged the blankets from beneath him and he helped her wiggle them free. She took off the rest of her armour, hesitated for a moment, and then undid her hair, Thuggory's words about Hiccup's attraction to it scintillating at the back of her mind. Again, she found she rather enjoyed the way his eyes widened.

She hesitantly moved forward and lay down next to him, biting her lip as he looked at her with the same wide-open look.

Then she remembered Cami, and moved forward, throwing an arm around him and her head on his chest again. Her eyes started falling closed right away as his comfort and warmth seeped into her.

"Oh, ok, wow!" he said, and she chuckled sleepily. "Goodâ€| goodnight â€| Asta."

"Hmm," she replied. She felt him bring the blankets up around them. And she may or may not have felt his lips on her crown, but she couldn't be sure. Comfort, warmth and lightness of heart swept her away into an easy sleep.

=0=

After the talks from the past few days, it was almost a relief to return to the arena. As Cami still refused to attend the talks, Hiccup had decided that he would begin with the lessons for those of Trollguts and Slugsnot who wanted them. A few of the adults had been given a brief overview, and information to read and memorise on dragon breeds they preferred - all the ones who had come had a very clear idea of their choice, at least. They were all sitting on one side of the arena, muttering about things they read between them and it seemed to be going fairly well without much supervision, though he was keeping half an eye on them. Spit was there too, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, together with Dartbolt, Nutthead and Gustav. Some more of the adults of the remaining two un-dragoned tribes were dotting the top of the arena, looking on and discussing things between them. Hiccup was giving practical information taken from the bonding lecture as the new student vibrated with eagerness and fear when he stared at the gronkle in front of him. Spit wasn't ready to bond with a dragon yet, but he could do with the extra tutoring on the information if he was to join the class with the children next Spring - the others were very much ahead.

The large rock dragon was asleep, snoring thunderously. Spit was

looking at it wide-eyed.

"Now, Spit," Hiccup said, Tuff and Snotlout beside him as they herded all the children towards the centre. "This is a gronkle. He's an older dragon who belongs to one of the Hopperdottir clan members, and his name is Stout. He's going to help you get used to the idea that dragons aren't always going to rip your face off."

Spit swallowed and Astrid punched Hiccup in the shoulder. He looked back at her in askance, and she rolled her eyes and pointed at Spit, who suddenly looked utterly pale. Oh, for the love ofâ€œ!

"Let's start," he said without any more preamble. Thuggory would probably be joining him soon, too, as all the heirs had sort of defected as a sign of good-will to Cami. Hiccup wasn't sure if he wanted or dreaded Dogsbreath doing the same. After sort-of getting his revenge on him, Hiccup had begun to feel sorry for shafting the other heir into the affair in so cavalier a manner, and after the glowing success of last â€œ oh gods, last night with Astrid. He felt a stupid smile spread on his face. Astrid punched him in the shoulder again, but this time, she was smiling too. The slightly pink tinge on her cheek was like a Thawfest medal.

"Spit, I want you to come here next to me, and I want you to pay attention to what I am doing; you're going to repeat every single movement I make, so stay sharp. A'right lad?"

He waited for Spit to nod hesitantly and gave a small demonstration of how to approach a dragon, what to do and what not to do, then put his hand on the boy's shoulder. He gave a tense start, and immediately looked up like a deer caught in a hunter's sights, the moment before it bolts.

"Calm down, bud," he said with a smile. He turned to Toothless, who had been a burr-dragon since the events in Snotlout's bathtub, stuck to his side and looking up at him with large worried eyes. With a gesture the black dragon bounded up, eager to please even more than usual. Spit gave an eep and buried his face in Hiccup's hip.

"Come on," he said gently, patting the boy's back. "This is Toothless, you've seen him at the meetings. You know he's a good dragon, and won't hurt you."

"He was growling, and angry, and terrible!" Spit protested in a mumble, face still pressed into Hiccup's flying armour.

"He was?" Astrid said walking up. Hiccup gave her a chagrined look.

"During the last meeting, things went a little â€œ South," he admitted with a wince. She narrowed her eyes at him and folded her arms, cocking her hips. His eyes fell to it without his consent and when he looked up at her again there was a cat's grin on her face. He felt his cheeks heat up, but he couldn't muster any annoyance.

"You were saying," she prompted, her grin getting wider. He cleared his throat.

"Dancing with Sleet didn't stop Madfoot any," he said in a low voice. "So Toothless and the other dragons made a show of uncovering their

teeth and growling at him when I cued them."

"There's more to this," she said with a tilted head. He gave her a look that promised later.

"Anyway, there really isn't anything to worry about. Toothless is not a dangerous dragon unless he feels that he is in danger, or the ones he cares for are." He looked down at Spit, who had brought his face away from Hiccup's belly enough to look up at him.

"What? You're afraid of Toothless? You're a chicken!" Gustav laughed. Snotlout hit him upside the head.

"I remember someone who ran screaming the first time he saw a night fury," Dartbolt said with nonchalance.

"Knaa."

"Settle down," Hiccup said with finality.

The rest of the session went relatively well. Hiccup allowed Spit to approach Toothless and Stormfly, both dragons sniffing him and giving him a lick or a preen after they had made friends. Now, Spit was going to try to touch the dragon with next to no assistance, and the snoozy gronkle was shaken awake for the task. Stout* was naturally a mellow dragon, and he was patient with almost all the children and new recruits he encountered. After some cajoling, Spit let himself be coaxed to coming close to the dragon, who looked at him with eager eyes and slightly wagging tail from all the attention, and the promise of a fish in Spit's hand.

"Right, now move one more step," Hiccup instructed him slowly. He was standing directly behind the boy, hands on his shoulders. As Spit stepped forward, he let them fall and crouched down beside him.

"Alright, little heir, just hold your arm out and look away. No, not the one with the fish! Yes, yes, that one. Good. Now wait for him to come to you â€| and â€| there." The gronkle nuzzled the tiny boy's hand without hesitation, Spit looking at him with a mix of terrified wonder. "Now you can pet him and give him a fish."

Hiccup stepped back, letting the boy get used to handling the calm and submissive dragon who merely enjoyed the attention. With a nod to Tuff and Snotlout, the other children were convinced to move forward and make friends. Hiccup quailed Gustav with a look when he looked about to open his mouth with a stupid comment, and the boy ducked his head and was appreciatively nice to the startled Spit.

"I'll bet you were about that terrified when you met Toothless," Astrid said, coming up beside him. Toothless, coming up the other side, gave a huff in agreement, his expression clearly mocking with a 'you should have seen it' eye-roll.

"I'll have you know, mister, that you were just as scared of me. And I weighed ninety pounds and could barely lift a shield."

"Oh, to have been a fly on the wall," Astrid said with an amused lilt in her voice. "And I'll bet you two spoke to each other like this all the time, when you were away?" Her grin was like that of a terrible terror breaking into a year's stock of dried fish.

"Pretty much. I regret nothing," Hiccup replied, and she punched him in the shoulder for it. Toothless snorted at him, satisfied grin on the dragon's scaly lips as he went across to the children and then threw himself belly-up without preamble. All of them made a beeline for him, the gronkle following suit, and within minutes all of them, Spit included, were shrieking with laughter as they tried to make the dragons' legs kick in time with one another. Stormfly simply sat down and cackled at them in obvious dragonesque amusement.

"Say," Astrid said, after she finished laughing. "Will you ever tell me what else you did?" She looked at him with open earnestness. "You've told me some things, but â€œ could I know more? Of those years, I mean."

"I â€œ um," Hiccup swallowed, looking at her. He could never deny her anything, he knew that. But there were parts of his life out there that he was not proud of, and others that he was downright ashamed of. Especially with her.

He looked at her with slight worry, chewing his lip. "I â€œ don't think you want to hear it."

"Yes I do, I just asked," she replied defiantly, her brow furrowing.

"Look, I don't know, ok. I don't think I can talk about it with you. It's, some of it is â€œ "

"Can't talk about it â€œ with me. So you don't trust me, is that it?" she said, voice sounding hurt as she looked away, folding her arms against her chest tighter.

"No! No- I mean yes- Yes, I trust you." He scratched his chin, thinking frantically about a way to say this without sounding like an oaf and coming up blank. "I don't think I want to talk about it with anyone."

"Hiccup, I'm your future wife," she said. And then suddenly she swallowed and went as red as he'd ever seen her go. But she didn't stop, shaking herself and continuing. "I just mean, if we're â€œ if we're going to spend our life together, then â€œ" she seemed to choke up, and he knew he could feel his own cheeks heat. The awkwardly hopeful embarrassment was choking.

"Oh, yeah, unless you ask for a divorce after a week," he said wryly. And as soon as it fell out of his mouth, he knew he'd failed miserably at trying to lighten the mood.

"So you really don't trust me," she hissed. "Did nothing I said yesterday mean anything to you?" Rigid as a post she spun on her heels, heading for the arena gate.

"Shit," he ran after her. "It was a joke, Astrid, a stupid joke, I'm sorry, I just-"

"Leave me alone, Haddock," she said as she unholstered her axe, and for a terrifying moment he thought he was going to be cut in half by his own creation, but she only swung it at him menacingly. "I'm going to kill trees."

"Oh boy, Astrid, please," he said insistently, running after her.
"Look, I'm me, I say stupid things. Astrid, wait, Astrid. Damnit, Hofferson! Listen—"

She spun around and slapped him. He blinked for a moment, looking at the wall where his face had been turned with the blow.

"That's my name, but I haven't been part of that clan for a long, long time, Cattongue," She hissed. He turned around to look at her, blinking and still slightly dazed. "And I | I | oh, Hiccup." Astrid looked at her hand, seeming to realise what she'd done. She seemed to be stuck between the explosive anger and dismay at her slap - huh, dismay at hitting him. That was a new one.

She quickly spun, and would have rushed out had he not lunged and grabbed her.

"Astrid -oof- please don't go like this. I don't want to quarrel with you any - ow! Woman, will you please stop injuring me."

Astrid slumped against him. After a moment, she hid her face in his chest. If her ears were any indication, her face must be crimson.

"I'm sorry," she said in a thin voice he didn't like at all. "That's all I seem to be able to do."

"Yeah, but then you kiss it better," he replied, knowing full well that - ow! Yeah, right in the gut. "Woman!"

"I'm sorry," she said, and her face rubbing against his upper chest and shoulder, seeking comfort, instantly sent his heart thundering. "I should know not to hit my wuss too hard. I may break him."

"Thank you, Astrid. Your vote of confidence in my strength is a boost to the ol' self-esteem."

"But really; sorry. I'm a bit | high strung, after our fight and | yeah. I think. I just | I wanted to know who Sepha was."

It almost felt like he was thrown in the sea, freezing so cold that his blood crystallised in his veins and his lungs couldn't expand if they wanted to.

"How do you | how do you know her name?" he asked, his voice thankfully toneless. His mind was buzzing, chasing itself in panic; how did she know? Who had told her? He had never told anyone, no one at all, and yet she knew that _name_.

"You used to call her, when | you had the fever. From your foot."

Hiccup swallowed. He felt terrified and cornered. His mind wouldn't work, and his legs were too jellified to flee like he wanted to.

"If you don't want to tell me, I mean | I don't have the right to pry, but I thought, since we were talking and |"

"I no, no, you have every right. I just, I | it's hard." Harder than leaving. Harder than even coming back. Certainly harder than

forgiving them all. But only slightly harder than what he'd said last night. He shifted, holding her tighter. "Astrid, I will tell you. I promise, I will. Only, can you â€œ After the Thing." He nodded to himself. "I already promised you could see my leg, and- yeah, this. I'll tell you everything." His voice broke on the last word.

"You sound â€œ "

He could mention a dozen ways he had probably sounded; scared beyond reason, choked. Possibly constipated. None of them good.

"You may not like me very much when I'm finished," he said in a small voice. Astrid hit him again. "Ow!"

"Wuss," she hissed. "_My_ wuss. Don't you forget it." They looked at one another, both with worried looks on their faces. "So, later. After the Thing?" He nodded tensely, worry rising to his mind. But he owed her this. He owed her all the truth, about the battles and everything else; and then he would take her judgement, whatever it was.

He prayed to Freya, Frigga and Lofn with fervor in that moment - please, let this not be how I lose her, after all.

"I will. I also want to know why you were quarrelling with meâ€œ before. You know, before the dance. Because we were quarrelling, right?"

"Oh, that? I ...erâ€œ" she went a solid red, looking at anything but him. He wasn't sure what to make of that reaction, but it sent his eyebrows towards his hair. "After the Thing. I'll hold you to it," she said with finality. "And I'll â€œ tell you the other thing. Too. I promise, also." Then she rolled her shoulders, pushed onto her tiptoes and kissed him, full on the mouth. "I'm off to change the hay in the beddings, like a good â€œ future wife." She laughed, shaking her head. He held fast onto her and she gave him a questioning look.

"You don't have to do that," he said with finality. "If you don't want to do that, you don't have to. If you'd rather go out and train, or go on patrol, or spar, or do â€œ do anything, you know, Astrid, then you do that. And I can cover for you."

She blinked up at him, and then a smile he'd never seen before spread on her face, one he'd never really dreamt he'd see. It was mellow and sort of fond, if a little cheeky around the corner of her mouth.

"So that's what it was all about, all the offers to do chores for me. You thought I was unhappy to do them."

"Um, well," he stammered with a sheepish shrug. "I remember how you hated them. I didn't, don't, want you to be unhappy."

"I'm not unhappy," she said, her fondly cheeky smile still there. "I've come to realise that doing chores and housework for the sake of doing it is one thing. Doing it for people you care about is a completely different thing." He couldn't help blushing, and she sniggered at him. "But now you're doomed. Now you offered to help me, and you can never take it back."

"Never?" he asked in mock trepidation.

"Not ever," she replied. She kissed him again, this time she lingered longer, drawing him down after her when she moved away. "And don't tell my mother this, but she's always right. I'll see you later!"

He sighed as he watched her go, his chest a great deal lighter than it was before, despite the looming terror of the promised talk. Still, he had work to do, and â€|

He turned around to find the kids looking at him with a range of expressions; from disgust and mild intrigue on Gustav's face to sheer starry-eyes from Dartbolt. Spit was looking at him like he'd seen it all before.

Tuff and Snotlout were rapidly jotting down notes on a piece of parchment.

"Did you promise to help her with the chores before or after she kissed you?" Snotlout asked, and Hiccup had the urge to slap his face. Toothless, on the side, was giving him his usual dragon laugh, accompanied by a jeering look that was utterly familiar and disgusting. Stupid dirty minded dragonâ€|

"Nothing to look at," he said sternly. ("Now" Tuffnut said, getting cuffed in the head). "Let's get back to dragon training."

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1 It was only after writing this scene and editing it several times that I realised it had been unconsciously influenced by reens' 'The Choice'. This time, the reference is not intentional, but I suppose that makes it more special.

2 Asta, according to The Viking Answer Lady, is a diminutive for Astrid, as is Åtta. In this case, Hiccup is also using it as an endearment; Ast- means 'god, one of the Åtsir' and therefore Hiccup is calling her a goddess in so many words. Our boy is corny, but truly endearing.

3 Stout is based on Daddy, the dog Mr Millan takes with him almost everywhere on the Dog Whisperer series. Daddy is a pitbull who should be used as an example to show how beautiful and adorable the breed is. Only bad owners make bad dogs.

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**Many different kinds of talking going on in this chapter; again, watch that epithet. **

13. Lines to the Heart

This is one of the sappiest things I have ever written. No doubt, you'll all love it. Oh, and Stoick has **_*no_*
shame.**

Warning: some sensuality.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 11 - Lines to the Heart_

**For it was beautiful upon our tongues and we traced all the lines to the heart.**

â€• _**Regina O'Melveny**_

Stoick left that meeting a great deal less stressed than he had the day before. His son's absence had forced him to pay his full attention to the proceedings though - and he'd never known that fishing on eel-island was contested because the Trollguts liked to eat them, but the UglyThugs thought the dragons that lived there were too rare to be endangered. Apparently, they were good for more than fish soup. Who knew?

The Hall was seeing more activity than it had in quite a few years. The Thing had not occurred on Berk in a long time, as most of the ships sailing towards them had either been sunk or summarily pillaged by the reptilian opportunists. That was something else he regretted; after the first few times, and after the underpants incident, he'd stopped taking Hiccup with him. Thuggory and Cami would ask about him every time, but when the boy had started his apprenticeship at the forge, and started to get into even more trouble trying to prove himself, Stoick had decided that it would no longer be wise to take such a liability for Berk with him.

Truly, he was a terrible father. Oh Val; she would kill him. Skin him and tan his hide, then make him wear it again.

Only now did Stoick realise that he had cut his son off from the only friends he'd had at the time. And he was very lucky that Hiccup had been able to forgive him and rekindle those friendships, as Stoick had seriously begun to doubt his son's ability to succeed him at one point, and seen his ties with the other heirs as both pointless and somewhat dangerous - now they were a boon, especially with the Meatheads and Bogs being as thick as thieves with them thanks to this.

He'd noticed that something had happened with the UglyThug boy. Hiccup wouldn't otherwise have planted a friend in the middle of a problem situation the way he had. He had to talk to him about it, but perhapsâ€!

He pushed the door to his home with a sigh, welcoming the cheery warmth of the fire and every sound and smell that meant home nowadays. Ever since Astrid had really gotten the hang of cooking, there was always such joy in going home and finding the hot meal making the main room smell wonderful.

Fireworm had refused to leave his side - possibly an after effect of all the tension that they had gone through the previous day, but she had been bored silly and ended up falling asleep, her snores rattling

the weapons bracketed on the column above her. At least the rumble had kept him awake.

The tired nightmare left him at the hall entrance with a lick and pushed the barn one open, tottering inside. When Stoick closed the door behind him, he could hear murmurs from the dragon barn, two distinct voices chatting in quiet tones. He paused for a second, recognising his son and betrothed, and moved on, gravitating inexorably towards the pot.

"Help yourself!" Astrid called, and he grinned beneath his mustache, glad his facial hair and the lack of people in the room prevented anyone to witness this moment of childish glee. He hated to admit it, but when he served his own portions, he always tended towards filling the bowl \textasciitilde just a little more.

Once his food was steaming out of a wooden bowl, he grabbed a spoon and tiptoed to his own bed chamber to eat his spoils without owing up to the larger portion. He grinned again when the younglings walked into the main room not seconds after he closed the door, and he sat on his bed with his loot, spooning the fish soup down eagerly. He'd have something to brag about with Gobber tomorrow, at any rate.

"I've never encountered it, but I'm sure it's nothing alarming."

"But Stormfly almost went after me!" Astrid said in a worried and hurt tone. Stoick's spoon stopped half-way to his mouth.

"When you stepped right in the middle of the greeting dance that she and Clover were engaged in," Hiccup chastised mildly. "I've told you that nadders are touchy about that."

"I know," Astrid replied. He heard them both sit around the fire, Astrid opened the pot and gave them each a bowl of the soup. "But I've done it before, when she's flapping away at one of the local nadders. She's never cocked her tail at me."

"Yes, well \textasciitilde to be honest, I think it may have been more than a greeting dance," Hiccup replied. Stoick moved towards the reed-mat that gave his bedding area some privacy, closing it off with a door from the rest of the house and sat down on a stool as quietly as he could. But through the gaps in the weave, he could see into the lit room perfectly. Astrid was already in her long white sleeping tunic, her hair braided down one shoulder, while Hiccup was in his day-clothes without his armour. Evidently, whatever had happened with the nadder had caused them to retire early that day.

Or \textasciitilde well, they were betrothed, and her dowry was upstairs, so they were safe if they decided to \textasciitilde indulge. He grinning in triumph.

"You don't?" Astrid asked. Hiccup shook his head, drinking the broth from the bowl and looking pensively at the fire. With his jaw shadowed by his hair as it was, he looked the spitting image of his Val, down to the shining, intelligent eyes.

"Hmm," he replied, voice absent as his mind worked. Astrid moved subtly closer with a shiver, and that seemed to catch Hiccup's

attention right away, pulling a shawl from a pile beside him and draping it over her shoulders. "Well, Clover and Stormfly have had a thing going since they met back when you were beginning to train her. That dance they were making looked a lot more elaborate than the usual greeting dances they make, and since nadders mate for lifeâ€|"

Hiccup blushed as his mind caught up to his mouth, burying his face in the bowl as Astrid gave him a knowing look. Praise Frigga, Hiccup was all his mother, down to the sweet shyness and the ever-tested temper.

"That would explain why Clover won't leave her side tonight. I hope Toothless doesn't mind too muchâ€|"

Stoick blinked, and for the first time realised that his son's dragon was curled up beside the fire, his black hide blending him in with the hall's shadows perfectly. Damnit, he hoped the dragon didn't witness his theft. He'd rat him out right away.

"Mind sleeping by the fire and practically at the foot of my bed, you mean? Oh, I think he really does," Hiccup said mockingly, nudging him with a toe. Toothless gave an annoyed rumble, and Hiccup chuckled. Astrid nudged him gently with a shoulder.

"Leave him be, or he'll set your trousers on fire. I think he really liked it when Hoark's nightmare did it to Snotlout last week. It may have given him ideas."

"Nah, he wouldn't do that to me" Hiccup grinned. "He's not the type to bully a one-legged man."

She snorted. "In any case, I'll try to see what Heather and I can cook up tomorrow. It's going to be â€| odd, if her dragon decides he doesn't want to leave Berk. How do you know they mate for life, anyway?"

Again, his son blushed. Stoick rolled his eyes, but Astrid seemed to find it endearing. "It's only a suspicion, really. When I travelled up north, where the dragons weren't really affected by the Red Death, I always saw nadders in pairs, and they tended not to change very often."

"Hmm," Astrid replied, returning to her food and leaning into him. Her bare feet extended towards the fire, toes wiggling. "You learn something every day."

The rest of their meal was silent, save for the eloquent glances they gave one another. As soon as it was done and the bowls put away, both of them were left staring awkwardly at one another beside his curtain.

Stoick bit his lip to stop himself from telling them to get on with it.

His son, finally, did him proud as he bent down and kissed her, and Astrid did what all warrior woman did when the man they chose gave them attention, reciprocating in kind with her own brand of unusual gentleness. Ah, he remembered his own Val, how she'd go from breaking heads and hitting everyone with her staff to resting her head on his

chest, peaceful and content.

He blinked when he heard them talking again, unashamedly listening in. Gobber had a betting pool running, and Stoick had put down a few sheep on the success of their relationship. Stakes had gotten even higher after their quarrel, so this was a good sign.

"Hiccupâ€| may Iâ€|?" she seemed to falter, but judging by the way his son coloured, it had to be one of those questions. "May I stay?"

Stay? Stay where â€| oh! Oooooh! Come to think of it, he hadn't heard Astrid climb up to her room yesterday, and since the wooden stairs ran right past his room and her room was up on top of his, he should have been roused by the noise, no matter how tired he was or quietly she trod - he was a warrior, he slept like one. Score! He had better start speaking to the Hoffersons about the wedding next Spring after all.

"Astaâ€|" Ah, smart boy, his son. Giving a woman an endearment was worth giving her a thousand flowers. Or weapons. "I'd really like that." Atta boy! "Butâ€|" What? "Astrid, it would be nice. Too nice. Too much of a temptation."

Oh, so they hadn't indulged. Bugger. Bugger all.

"Hiccup, you â€| you know I wouldn't â€| mind, right?"

Stoick almost burst out laughing at his son's face, cupping his own mustache so that he didn't make a noise and alert them. It was precious, really, how his cheek was twitching.

"Erk, no, no I didn't know, and I think it would have been better for your honour if I hadn't," he replied helplessly. Then he shook himself. "Astrid, we're not married yet. If â€| if you start showing signs â€| Look, I've already made a mess of your honour at the dance. I'm not doing that again. And especially not before we have that talk. You know, about â€| about my five years, and â€| after that, you'll know everything, andâ€| well, certainly not before. Please understand."

"I do, I guess," she said, and there was real disappointment there. Hiccup bit his lip and stepped back, closing the curtain.

"Goodnight, Asta," he said. Astrid stood there for a moment longer, one hand holding her shawl while the other rose to rest against the curtain. Stoick twisted, and was on time to see Hiccup's hand close around hers from the other side. The curtain flew open suddenly, and Hiccup swooped down and kissed her, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her off her feet. Stoick grinned and punched the air victoriously as the kiss continued for quite a few moments, and Astrid didn't seem to mind being man-handled.

Still carrying her, Hiccup walked across the main room in three strides and stopped at the foot of the stairs. He didn't put Astrid down right away, and Stoick twisted, trying to see them as they stood right beside his room, the blasted weave of the reeds obscuring most of them.

"Hiccup," Astrid said, and there was a certain quality in her voice that almost made Stoick blush. And then grin. Haha, that was his son! "We don't have â€| I mean, yesterday, we just slept."

"Have mercy on me," he begged, and as they were so close, their voice was clearer even though they whispered. Stoick winced in sympathy. It was true - Astrid had probably slept the night before. Women seemed to have an easier time resisting the call of a warm body. "I want to take care of you, Asta," He kissed her. "Even when you don't want me to."

"You've told me something to that effect beforeâ€|" she replied, sighing in what sounded like resignation. "But only if you let me take care of you, too."

"Astrid, I'm not a child."

"Neither am I," she replied, punching him in the gut. He grumbled but didn't seem to mind as Stoick could barely see her hand rubbed the sore spot. "And I know you're used to making it on your own. But I like taking care of my â€| husband." They were silent for a few seconds, and then the sound of a kiss ending explained it. "I'm serious. It's just the same as you wanting to care for me. I'm a warrior of Berk, not a helpless little lass. I'll let you if you let me."

"Fair enough," Hiccup replied. "Just â€| not certain things, ok? The leg and â€| I promised you later, after the Thing. Can we keep that, until then?"

"Clinging to your last weeks of freedom before I own you completely?" she teased. Hiccup's prosthetic foot shifted. "I was only joking, I'm sorry. I didn't mean â€|"

"No, nothing like that," he replied, and Astrid's feet landing on the wooden stair told Stoick that he'd only now put her down. "You own me already. Just, I told you, you may not like what you hear. Still â€| I accept your transaction. I get to take care of you, and you get to take care of me. Just no mothering. Frigga knows your mother does it enough for twelve."

"I really don't want to mother you, Hiccup Haddock." Stoick, seasoned warrior, blushed scarlet at her tone. Hiccup, apparently, was his father's son, because after a few minutes of silence, Astrid's feet landed on the wooden stair again, lips smacking and breathing heavy.

"Good night," he told her with finality, though his voice broke in the middle with a husky laugh. "And now you know that I â€| well, now it's very obvious that I'm not refusing because I'm not interested. Couldn't let you think that."

"How did youâ€|"

"The arena this morning and the dance. I thought it was obvious how much I wanted to dance with you, but it wasn't. So I'm totally going to make the obvious more obvious. Just so â€| I don't want to quarrel like that, ever again."

"Yes. I â€|" She sighed. "You're right. Part of me wants to talk to

you right now, but we have so much work and so much going on, we just don't have time to go off for a day and really talk, do we? And if we misunderstand or we quarrel. we need time to really talk, and we don't have that."

"Not yet. After the Thing. After that, I'll get Gobber and Snotlout and anyone who I happen upon on the street to cover for me, and you'll have me for as long as you want."

"You are an evil man," she sighed. "To phrase it like that."

"Urk, Astrid."

He stepped away, cloth rustling and the quiet click-thump of his step crossed the room again at a slower pace.

"Good night," he said.

"Good night," she replied. He disappeared behind the curtain, and silence took over the room, the crackling fire the only noise. Stoick couldn't see Astrid, but knew she hadn't moved up the stairs. With a rustling and a dull thump, she sat down, and the chief could barely make out her feet, sticking out beyond the first stair, white linen sleeping clothes almost glowing.

She sat there in silence for quite a few minutes, her feet moving back and forth on the floor. Another muted noise indicated that she had rested her head against the wooden sidewall of the stairs which confined with his room. Stoick sat very still for a second, almost expecting her to call out to him and chide him for listening (he was the patriarch! And the chief! He totally, totally could! And he had sheep on this!)

She sighed, and Stoick had never heard Astrid sigh like that - like a sweet girl, thinking on her special one, instead of a hard and crusty shieldmaiden that she was. An endeared smile rose under his beard.

Then a grin. Double Score. He was SO augmenting his flock.

Astrid rose and climbed the stairs after a while, whispering a near inaudible 'goodnight' before closing her door behind her. Stoick merely grinned, finishing off his now cold food and going to bed, still smiling obscenely.

That was his boy, making the best warrior of her generation melt at the knees. Stoick knew he had it in him. He went to sleep grinning. Like father, like son, after all.

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"But they seem to be doing better?"

"Well, yeah, but they were still fighting. She slapped him across the face and almost cut him in half with an axe yesterday. They did make up. And make-out." A snicker. "Right after that. But still, it doesn't look like things are really as good as they should be, you know."

Snotlout shrugged after a pause, continuing; "My cousin's been

through Hel's teeth, cleaning their rotten remains off. He deserves to enjoy some fruit for his labour."

Thuggory nodded pensively, one hand stroking his budding beard as the other tapped his elbow. "You have any suggestions?"

Snotlout sniggered. Toothless gave a half-lidded look that said 'Of course I do, moron'

"Then would you mind sharing?" Thuggory answered in annoyance.

"Are you ~~â€|~~ talking to~~â€|~~ of course you are." Snotlout gave a huff. "Listen to the dragon, never mind that I could have had an idea."

"Well, do you?"

"No, but it's the principle."

Toothless' tail came around and whacked him around the head. The protective wing that was saving him from a drenching closed with a snap and the big fat droplets began to seep into his fur and clothes.

"Hey!" he protested. The dragon just laughed. "Oh, whatever. So what's your idea, genius?"

Toothless hobbled forward, his steps urgent. They didn't have much time, this they knew. Hiccup was inside in the talks again, and Thuggory had slipped away with an out-house excuse. He also knew Toothless had refused to get off his arse and away from the still-warm hearth that morning, even though Astrid had offered him a tarbot, in order to meet the two men.

A __**tarbot**___. He almost never got those!_

They had better appreciate it._

Thuggory sighed. He could read Toothless's body language as clearly as if he'd been mumbling. Hiccup had been frowning and worrying all morning that his dragon had refused his favourite fish. He'd appeased his friend by telling him it was probably lack of exercise that made his appetite diminish, and then Hiccup had looked impossibly guilty.

Toothless stopped in front of a shed. It was tiny, by Viking standards at least, and it certainly wasn't well kept. A constant drip-drip echoing inside told of at least one hole in the roof.

But it had one thing that Toothless kept nosing - and it made both men grin mischievously at one another.

It locked on the outside, and the wooden latch was surprisingly not rotted. Thuggory slid it into place and tugged, and the door held.

The two men and the dragon grinned at each other.

"Sleipnir's1 shit, this is brilliant." Thuggory couldn't have grin more if his face had split in half.

"Simple, yet effective." Snotlout's mouth also split open. "Gotta admit, it's Viking proof."

Tooth's mouth also split into a toothless grin equal to their own.

You lot owe me a boat-load of __**tarbot**_.

Thuggory winced. He'd heard that as clearly as if Toothless'd said it. He got the same looks from Fanghorn when the dragon did him a favour.

Damn reptiles, they drove hard bargains.

"Don't look so smug yet, fork-tongue," Snotlout said, still cross-armed. "We still have to find a way to lure them here."

Toothless' smugger expression made both men sigh.

"I fancy a spot of fishing."

"Seems we'd better both fancy itâ€‘ stupid dragonâ€‘ ow!"

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There were days of the year on Berk when, even in the Winter, the sun peeked out from behind the cloud banks and played peek-a-boo with the halls below. Furs were still a good idea - the sun never warmed up much this time of the cycle, but there was something to be said about bundling up and going sun-hunting, above the clouds.

Sure, it was so cold that your teeth felt like they were turning into painful daggers sinking into your gums when you breathed in, and your beard got a few icicles hanging pretty here and there, but nothing new in Winter on Berk.

And it was especially pleasant when you had a warm body to snuggle up against.

"There's something wrong with the bairn, you say?" he asked rather worriedly. That child was going to be the end of him, really. As if it wasn't enough that he didn't get enough visits throughout the year to satisfy himself that nothing bad had happened, and to make sure he didn't have to step in and beat some heads - and come to think of it, they'd have a chat, now, about how having a dragon meant more visiting time - but now even his wife didn't know what was going on.

Gobber bit at his mustached.

"An' let me get this straight; you're bein' kept in the dark on't?"

"Hmm," was the reply. The morning sun was peeking over the horizon of clouds, still pink from the dawn, and the blue sky around them looked clear and sharp enough to dip a hand in and drink from.

"A thousand blackened thumbs," he swore, "it'll drive me nuts, it

will, woman. What do you want me to do."

"Tell the bairn to come over for a chat? You know, you're very important to that child, but ye rarely come visit us."

"Ye knew when ye took me that I could'na leave Berk," he said with a sigh, patting her waist where he was holding on. "I've a shop to take care of, and ye know better'n I that I wouldn'a be welcome on yer shores. The shop's part of why ye wanted me, you crazy woman."

"Oh aye," she replied, sultry as ever, leaning back against him and rubbing her back against his front like a needy dragon. "No one does maces quite like yours, dear. You can bash fifteen hundred heads in, and they'll still be good as new. And let's not talk about your flailsâ€| never fail to get me hot under the armour."

"Glad you approve," he said, still giddy as a boy when she paid him complements. Joke as they might, solid as they were despite living apart for the majority of the year due to their respective responsibilities, he still wondered why a powerful, well-positioned and remarkably still beautiful woman like her had chosen a crusty, old, two-limbed man. Still, he was past the point of fearing her loss and well into the stage where he was gloating the conquest - if not with many people. He had learned that all men were inferior to good women anyway, it was a fact of life.

And never was it more true with this kind of woman.

"I'll talk to my little bairn then; if I get the chance, mind," he sighed. "'S been a long time since she could sit on my knee and I could hold her there."

"Eh," Bertha shrugged. "She'll listen to ye. May come herself, actually. The girl loves her da', ye know. She's just at that age when she's more interesting in looting than the stories of 'em loots. She won't speak to me, and I think â€| I'm afraid it may be a boy this time, Gobby-dear."

"Now thatâ€|" he said in a growl, "...is really mine te' deal with. And if I know someone's been messing with me bairn, I'll get 'em and peel 'er skin off toes first."

"Atta boy, husband," Bertha said. She gave him a grin over her armoured shoulder that he returned, and patted his bad knee. "Say, that island down there, 's one of yours, right?"

"Oh, aye," Gobber replied. Bork had been gifted with a number of tiny islands for his work on the book of dragons, and it had made his family wealthy. As Gobber was his last surviving Berkian relative, he had inherited the lot. He'd probably give it to Hiccup as a wedding gift - or to his little bairn's man, if she chose as Berk man.

And if he found out that it was one of the lads who was playing fiddle with her heart, he was going to make sure Hiccup got the islands; only with an admonition never to go dig in a certain spot on one of them.

"Uninhabited?" she asked, peering down at it. It looked lush and green, wet from the Winter rain.

"Save for the beasties," he shrugged. Bertha gave him in a look, and then he wasn't at all surprised that her dragon started descending. He gave her a grin back. He knew where a couple of cosy caves were, and they had fur, and kindling, and some nice warm bread.

It was great to have some married time. It'd been months since they'd last met, after all. Still, the problem of his little sweet bairn rode high on his head, and he wasn't about to let that go so easily. He'd go out to find his little girl and have a long-overdue father-daughter chat. That little rascal hadn't even come to the forge once since the Thing started, and in hindsight he should have known there was some lad behind that. Sure, Hiccup had remained steadfast and mostly on task, even with his chase after Haknee's girl. But not all lads were as straight-laced as that boy and his little lass sure was not.

Ock, he didn't know if Hiccup'd managed to sort out that mess with lill' Astrid. He'd been sad and upset last time they talked, and things with his lass hadn't seemed to be going well. And he heard the rumour about something going down all wrong at the opening feast too. Some of the people of the village had been glaring at him and giving him a hairy-eyeball, though he didn't seem to notice any the last time they'd been in the forge together, with the boy hammering away at something and looking like his head was still riding a dragon.

They landed with a jolt, and he jerked Bertha with his distraction.

"You left your mind on Berk, husband?" she asked with a laugh. "Or is it at the Bog, recalling fond memories?"

"Eh," he sighed. "These bairns. They'll be the end of me." He ran a hand down his face and his mustache, getting rid of some of the ice-crystals.

"Ah, my family man," she said, tugging him towards one of the caves her dragon had already spotted. "You seem to know something I don't know. And since we're in a sharing mood, let's go get cosy and share, shall we?"

Geh. He hoped he wasn't going to get Hiccup into trouble, but Freya be damned for her wily ways, he couldn't ever deny this woman anything.

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1 That is the name of Odin's horse, who was conceived in a very, very strange way...

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Did you all think I was done with the crack pairings? **_*Because I sure as heck was not_*! Haha, yes, Gobber is Cami's daddy. Oh come on, don't tell me you can't see it!**

And then, we have the scheming wingmenâ€|

14. Trap

The process is finally going to begin. And â€| of course the wingmen didn't come up with a more elaborate plan. They're two blockheads and a dragon. In fact, the dragon may be the smartest one of the lot.

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><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 12 - Trap_

**I have come to realise that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection.**

â€• _**Henri J.M. Nouwen**_

"So; you're smiling."

Ruff's voice broke into her thoughts like thunder. Granted, it didn't take much these days for her thoughts to â€| wander. But Thor and Odin, who knew that he could make all her skin tingle like that, or that his arms were so strong that he could carry her around without really feeling it?

Or that she could make him kiss her that hard and get him panting with just a few words?

She should have been annoyed at it, too, really. He'd just grabbed her, put her down on the stair, kissed her silly and told her to go to bed. It was â€| well, she wasn't one of his dragons, to order about, and she wasn't a little girl to order to bed because she wouldn't go. Astrid couldn't muster enough anger to stay that way, though. Had it been Snotlout, one of her brothers, heck, even Tuff or the chief, she would have gone for a joint and bruised, if not broken. Hiccup hadn't even been trying to manhandle her, certainly not in a show of power. When he'd first pulled her off her feet, it had been a very, very good thing; she didn't quite want him to know how wobbly her knees had gotten. When he'd walked across the room and put her down on the stair, it had evidently been as hard for him as it was for her to get out of that embrace.

A still writhing, fearful part of her gut told her that he was also a man of the world, now; that he'd tasted of the fruit offered by Freya, and her mother always said that once a man had bitten into that fruit, there was no sating his desire for it. She had offered, and stoked that fire; it had nothing to do with her, and any emotions he had.

She stamped it down savagely. Hiccup could do many things - many, many things, she was discovering - but lies were apparently still beyond him. Even when he had a helmet that covered his whole face and fully-body armour, he gave himself away in a thousand little ways that had led her to find him out in only five days. And the earnest way in which he looked at her when he told her he was going to make

the obvious more obvious just â€| it was all Hiccup. Big green eyes and long lashes and awkward body twitches and fluttering hands. Stolen glances and his wobbly, sideways smile.

She didn't know when she'd noticed these things. Maybe she'd always known them, maybe she'd noted them in passing when they were children pretending to pillage and getting caught in the storage barns. Or maybe in the arena, just before he left, when he couldn't quite look at her in the eyes, and she'd missed how he used to look at her through his lashes like a shy child every time he tried to speak to her, and how she hated that he was avoiding her when before she had been the one avoiding him.

Avoiding him. And for such a stupid reason, too; and now look at her. Ah, Urd, Skuld and Verdandi had had the last laugh after all.

Still, Astrid couldn't pinpoint the exact moment in which she'd catalogued every little movement of his face when he was worried, or sad, or happy; or shy. Ruff had been right. He still was her adorable, shy Hiccup, his every single expression important, and maybeâ€|

"Oi, we've lost her."

Astrid jumped, her hands idly holding onto a linen sheet she was supposed to be scrubbing but was only being drowned in the river. Judging by how numb her fingers were from the frigid water, she'd been staring into nothing for â€|

Oh, Ruff was going to be unbearable, wasn't she?

"She's been lost," her mother laughed to her right, great slapping noises telling Astrid without looking that one of the dirty sheets was getting a good wallop. "She's just starting to realise it herself."

"Shut up," Astrid answered, much to her own chagrin as it start both woman on a laughing fit.

"Never thought I'd see it; Astrid Hofferson, greatest warrior, basher of skulls and holder of the title of 'Nut Cracker' after you almost took Snotlout's knob off with your bow and arrow, and there you are sighing like a dairy maid." Ruffnut cackled gleefully. "Now you can never make fun of me again for falling in love with my husband! I have my revenge!"

Astrid laughed, flinging freezing water at the other girl.

"So that was your plan all along! You didn't care to see me happy, you just wanted to even the field!"

Brunhilda laughed uproariously at them both. "Oh, you girls remind me so much of me and Val - she was the same as you are, daughter. Never a look at a man, till Stoick suddenly shot up five feet and grew a whisker. Then we had to start slapping her out of it."

"Hiccup's mother?" Astrid asked, blushing for no apparent reason and getting a wet sock to the face by Ruff, which made her throw her own wash in the basket, sopping the rest and launching at Ruff in much the same way her brother usually did. Woodnut had been given to

Birdfeet Ingermannn today, Fishleg's expecting cousin, and all of them were enjoying an unusual wash day on a Thor's Day, because of all the extra work with the guest huts. Pockets of other women littered the river, all in their usual spots, and everyone was carrying the linen from the guest houses in addition to their own, in accordance to the roster Astrid had created herself. She had to admit, housework or not, it gave her a certain thrill to be able to boss people around; one of the perks of being Hiccup's promised, apart from the obvious, which was getting Hiccup all to herself.

"You can't beat me, I'm the queen of this!" Ruff cackled, and suddenly they were twelve years old again, rolling in the mud and pulling each other's hair and laughing. Ruff tried to buck her off, but didn't manage until she made some rather lewd and suggestive comments about imagining someone else's body against her, which made her skin suddenly flush. Ruffnut had her a choke hold a moment later, crowing about wobbly knees.

"And believe you me, little virgin," Ruff said with triumph. "You haven't felt anything yet! Wait until the first time you touch Valhalla - or well, the first time Valhalla touches you." And then a jeer. "Unless it's happened already and that's why you're all staring off into nothing!"

"Hardly! And not for lack of trying!" Astrid laughed as she tried to fight Ruff's hold off. Brunhilda burst out laughing again, flinging the large sheet on a branch they had wrapped a worn cloth around earlier.

"Aha, I knew my daughter wasn't one to back down from a challenge!" she laughed. "The boy's still being a little bit shy on you, then?"

"Yes!" Astrid laughed, finally managing to flip Ruff over, only to be flipped again and ending in the same position. "But!" She groaned with exertion but was unable to get the taller girl off. They were both mostly weak from laughter anyway. "But he's also gone achingly noble on my ass."

"Oh, you wish!" Ruff said. She got an elbow in the gut.

"Says he messed my honour enough at the dance, and won't risk me showing signs before we're wed." Astrid replied with a frown thrown over her shoulder.

"Wellâ€|" Astrid blinked and looked around, Ruff also peering around her head at Brunhilda's astonished tone. Brunhilda came up to the basket, taking another large linen and dunking it into the river before she began rubbing the soap on it. "He didn't want, though you offered?"

Astrid shook her head, looking at her mother intently as she seemed to think.

"And you're sure it's not â€| you may not like this, darling, but he â€| was interested, in you, yes?"

"Oh!" Astrid said, and she could feel her face going up in flames. "Yes, yes he was." She laughed in relief. "He actually came back out

to kiss me silly and make sure I knew. Said he wasn't going to take chances with me misunderstanding anymore because he didn't want to quarrel."

"Well!" Brunhilda laughed.

"Kissed you silly, aye?" Ruff said into her ear. "Look at her colour! I think 'Valhalla' has touched her already!"

"Not like that, you dirty minded whore from the gutters of the mainland!" Astrid laughed back, elbowing her again. Ruff bumped her hips into her side suggestively, and Astrid finally threw her off, managing to get her flat on her back in the mud with a splat. The linen Ruff had been working on would need another washing. "My shift stayed on, and his hands stayed on top of it!"

"Aha!" Ruff said, pulling Astrid down in the mud with her. "So his hands WERE involved!"

"Shut up!" Yes, so what if she could still feel his hot, open palm everywhere? She hadn't really expected him to react like that when she'd goaded him about the whole mothering nonsense - to be honest, she'd barely recognised her own voice, but that was his fault for being all alluring. And she wasn't about to tell anyone, but she had liked it a great deal. She'd had to sit there and calm down before she could trust her legs to take her up the stairs.

Who knew? Hiccup the alluring should be his new name, never mind this Negotiator nonsense. Although he could negotiate himself into her bath tub whenever he-

ACH!

"Lookit her face!" Ruff was laughing helplessly, and Astrid slapped her own blazing cheek, yelping as the cold mud made contact. "Well, whatever you did, it worked, because he's going around smiling now, instead of with thunder on his head. And to think he'd asked Fish to look up stuff about breaking engagements and the lotâ€|"

The river suddenly didn't feel cold enough to reflect the emotion that rushed across her skin, and she swallowed hard. Astrid turned to look at Ruff, who suddenly was extremely white.

"Shit, sorry, that wasn't supposed to â€| Fish is going to be so mad at meâ€|"

Astrid bit her lip, the joviality of the afternoon completely vanished. Looking up things to break the â€|

She shook herself. No. No, Hiccup wasn't a liar, and he wasn't a cheat, and he had looked at her so honestly and earnestly that she would be a fool to think ill of him before she even asked. Maybe it was before, when they'd quarrelled. He had a right to be angry and do stupid things, just as she did. She'd not listened to him, hadn't she? Went around assuming madly horrible things about him before she gave him a chance to talk to her. Well, she wasn't going to do it again. She threw Cami another prayer of luck; she owed her that much for giving her perspective.

"It's fine," she said, firmly, taking up her linen again and somehow

actually feeling fine. It was a strange state of being, after so much doubt and worry and anger. She felt fine to believe that he had been honest that night, kissing her like that because he wanted to, telling her he liked that she owned him, looking at her over blushing freckles. And that voice of his, after their second kiss, that made her toes curl. There was still a bit of writhing from that coiled, doubting serpent the bottom of her belly, but â€œ the rest of her chest, there was some strange, solid thing that kept it in check.

With a jolt, realised that she trusted him. It put a smile on her face.

"Astrid?"

She turned to her mum, who was also looking at her in mixed worry and curiosity.

"It's really fine." Astrid said. "I don't know why but â€œ I don't think he meant to hurt me with it."

Brunhilda smiled. Ruffnut looked terribly relieved.

Astrid nodded, going back to scrubbing the new sheet. Well, be that as it were, she told herself, there was no reason why this little tadbit couldn't be added to her questions once 'later' came around.

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Wolftooth could honestly say that this didn't happen often. He had always been confident in his ability to judge and rule; it had never been a question for him.

He had always known that he was a smart Viking, a very smart one, and he ruled with his head accordingly. His son in turn had shown great promise to have the same kind of high mental qualities he valued in himself, and he'd taught him to hone them.

Then, of course, they had been hit by the Hiccup in the works. It was rather amusing, really, to think that he, Wolftooth, was rather stupid. He had been planning to give Stoick a hard time here - he had really, really not appreciated his fellow chief for scaring his son away from home merely because he had brain. So, what, was it that because his boy couldn't swing an axe at firebreathing beasties, he was useless? He had not appreciated the insinuation at his own rule, and had been fully intending to make him squirm in his seat by offering Hiccup a place in the UglyThug tribe; not seriously, of course, but just to watch Stoick go as red as his beard, and then admit it later over a keg and watch him feel horrified and guilty. Wolftooth did not appreciate Hiccup's brains being tossed and belittled in the slightest.

When Madfoot had approached saying he would like to try to convince Hiccup to join the UglyThug clan, he had, of course, been more than a little wary of what the slimy sleazeball had in mind . He had also learned to keep his enemies close. Madfoot was a dangerous son of a troll, and he wasn't about to let on that he didn't trust him. He'd warned the other chiefs, and seen whether he could let things run their course and use them as an excuse to bring Madfoot low; he could

execute him for treason, place his much more malleable son in his place and be one problem lighter.

He hadn't expected that kind of blatant yak-shit to begin flying around the Mead Hall; nor had he expected it to escalate to the point where Hiccup's right to throne or to live were called into question. And somehow Hiccup's relationship with his son had also been bent out of shape with this business, and that was a pity. Dogsbreath was reserved and quiet like his father, which meant that it was relatively difficult for him to be approached by people who, as a rule, punched each other in the face to say 'hello'. That Thuggory boy and Cattongue - pardon, Hiccup - had been doing wonders for the boy's interaction and integration with the archipelago's elite leading class. Now he often joined his father's table; he obviously was no longer welcome on the young heir's conquered bench in the Hall. Wolftooth felt for him; he himself had had his own difficulties and scrapes while he mingled with the other chiefs, and Stoick had been, in his case, the one to help bridge the gap with the others. The man was smart, smarter than his bulk would suggest, and so much more like his son than he believed. It had been what made Wolftooth so angry at him in the first place, to throw his son away like that.

The talks today had been stiff and stilted, and they spoke of the little things that everyone could agree on easily with unspoken agreement. He was looking forward to tomorrow night, where he could share a mug with Stoick in Hall for the mid-week communal meal of the chiefs and talk this out like friends instead of village heads. It reallys was a rotten situation to be in, but politics were politics; he honestly just knew that with Stoick, friendship, respect and good trading conditions went hand-in-hand and were as much a requirement as the trading goods. Wolftooth sighed. It would have to wait till tomorrow - and honestly, he did want his friend back.

"Father?"

Wolftooth looked up from his keg of steaming honey-water to find Dogsbreath standing at the entrance of their guest hall. At home, they were some of the few people who lived in a stone dwelling, with rooms divided by stout walls and oaken doors. The wood would never have withstood the gale winds of UglyThug island. As a result, however, these \u00e4 | communally open halls, with little to no room for privacy were a little stifling to them all. Especially when he had spotted at least three generals who would lose their title - if not their head - as soon as they made it home.

"What is it?" He waved Dogsbreath in, not at all happy to see how damp his son was, but pushing it aside. Blasted Berk - if it wasn't hailing, it was raining or snowing. At least on their island, they had windy plains and snow, and they came at predictable intervals. Here it could be a sunny day one moment, and the next you're soaked through because a rogue cloud was passing by and decided to piss on you, just because.

"Father," Dogsbreath said, and his son's very serious tone put him on the alter. The boy walked into the room, and opening the door further, brought in Sleet, daughter of Madfoot, who he was holding very firmly by the upper arm as if she was trying to get away. The girl was white as a sheet. And trembling.

"We have a problem."

=0=

He'd had to trust Toothless completely when they went in search for the right rocks to feed Meatlug. The meeting today had been unbelievably long - and anything but boring. Everyone had been there; Cami, him, Thuggory, Dogsbreath ¦ and it had not been a walk on the beach, either. Hiccup wanted boring back. There were too many disasters happening at this Thing. At the rate they were going, they were going to talk right through Snoggletog and then keep going till the ice broke.

So they'd gone rock-hunting at night, and Hiccup could say with great relief that at least, they'd found the damn things. Between his still-throbbing leg, the messes that were happening at these meetings and lows and highs (admittedly, very high highs) with Astrid, it was definitely one of my most trying times he'd lived through bar the weeks that had come before the Red Death landed on Berk. Honestly, even that first Winter, out in the cold and snow, in that dingy hut with Toothless and dying of hunger; it hadn't been as ¦ heavy as this one. Back then, he'd been responsible for his own life and his dragon's. Now he felt like he was carrying all of Berk with him - if he made the wrong decision, it wasn't just his own feet stepping into the bear trap, but everyone else's.

He had agreed with Fishlegs that they would meet at the very crack of dawn the following day. The Thing had already been going for a week, and was technically almost over. However, the topics didn't seem to be drying out, and now, with this new emergency¦

He sighed, steering Toothless in the dawn's pink and golden light towards the area they'd flown over yesterday. Meatlug was buzzing away behind him like a giant bee, and Fishlegs was not in a talkative mood, either too tired or too thoughtful. Hiccup himself was in no mood to chatter; he didn't have time to think on the new crises when he was still dealing with an old one.

Toothless gave a growl, and Hiccup almost sighed in relief. He signalled to Fishlegs, who bent down to pat his gronkle, and they all began to descend towards a glade sheltered from the wind by several high rocks. Hardy berry bushes lined the sides, covered in snow and sleeping out the Winter.

"Man, how I wish I could hibernate, myself," he sighed as he dismounted. His companion gave a grumble and nudged him with a wing joint. "Right, bud. We wouldn't be able to go flying if we're both snoring." And then a jeery sort of grin. "Or kiss Astrid. But we're not talking about that in front of other people and making fun of poor one-legged men now, are we?" Toothless gave a snort and nudged him again before he trotted away to go investigate whatever had caught his attention on the other side of the bushes. Meatlug landed straight down the middle, looking around the snow covered rocks with an air of faint excitement.

"She got really jittery when I told her that we were going to make the shiny iron," Fishlegs said with a headshake and a pat on her cheek, which she returned with a hearty lick. He chuckled and wiped his cheek. "You should have seen her this morning. Woke up the whole

house three hours before dawn with her rattling harness."

"I'll bet Ruff was really happy about that," Hiccup replied, leaning on a rock and trying not to snicker.

"Oh, threatened to skin us alive five times. That's not too bad; I start worrying when she starts muttering and looking my way while cooking." Fishlegs rubbed his head sheepishly. "I care for her, but she gives me the willies sometimes, when she looks at me with a scowl while chopping rabbit's heads off."

Hiccup shuddered with him in sympathy. "I know what you mean. When Astrid says she's going to kill trees while waving an axe at you, you see your life flash before your eyes." He chuckled to himself, some much more pleasant memories warming all the threats to seem almost like endearments. It was a far cry from the indifference she used to have for him before he left. He still didn't know what changed, but he really hoped it didn't change back.

That was a sobering thought. He wasn't going there ever again. He still couldn't quite believe that Astrid Hofferson, the most beautiful woman in Midgard, was looking his way, in that manner, and admitting that she cared about him, but he honestly didn't care what'd changed that.

"Anyway, Meatlug actually likes making the metal for us. Though to be honest, if I could spare her the troubleâ€œ! The sweet-tempered gronkle gave him a lick, and he laughed, patting her head. "It makes her a little ill, you see, before she throws all the metal up."

"Throws it up?" Poor Fishlegs looked really worried as he glanced at Meatlug, who gave him a puppy-eyed look of adoration. Hiccup contained a snort. Some of the bushes - or rather Toothless behind them - were not that nice.

"I've checked over the years that it doesn't hurt her teeth, but it actually seems to remove the bad ones and leave the good ones alone. I was worried about that for a whileâ€œ! So, Fish` - you can keep the secret of the stones for me, or do you need to look away?" Hiccup looked at him sheepishly. "Half the blacksmiths of the archipelago have been on my case about the metal's secret, and I really don't want to give it up. It will give Berk a good trading edge."

"Well, you know I can keep secrets," Fishlegs said with a scowl and folded arms. Hiccup blinked at him. "It's why you had me look for all those documents, didn't you? And you knew I wouldn't tell!"

"Oh, right, your search on the laws!" Hiccup said with a sigh, brushing his hands on his britches. "I was hoping to ask you about that a little later, but â€œ! have you found anything useful?"

"Yes, yes I have," Fishlegs said, voice dripping annoyance. He dug into Meatlug's travel bag and brought out three rolled pieces of parchment. Hiccup took them up eagerly, running his eyes quickly over the content intently one after that other. Close to the end of the last scroll, the frown that had been developing on his brow lightened completely as he gave a crowing laugh of triumph.

"Fishlegs, you're incredible!" he said, petting his friend on the

back. "I had missed this completely - where did you find it!"

"What?" Fishlegs looked at what Hiccup was pointing on the parchment. "Oh, that was a sub-clause on a very old scroll, actually. I think it may have even been the original treaty of the allied clans â€| why? I wouldn't have thoughtâ€|"

"This fixes everything!" he said in delight, carefully folding the scroll up and tucking it into his (once again) new tunic. And he really had to complement Astrid on how well her embroidery abilities were coming on. Those night furies looked much less like dogs this time - not that Hiccup would ever tell her he'd thought she was embroidering Odin's wolves on his other tunicsâ€|

"I wouldn't have thought that one was what you were looking for, considering," Fishlegs huffed. "And honestly, Astrid deserves better!"

"...Astrid?" Hiccup asked, stopping short in his whirling, elated thoughts about how he was going to apply this new tadbit of information to the next meeting, discretely and with the least possible fanfareâ€| probably have to involve his dad there and have him talk to the clan head about itâ€| then he should possibly inform those two before he did anything, so they'd be forewarned and not go do anything stupid â€| she'd been threatening to have the whispering deaths dig under all the sheep pens of the island and that would really not go down well with anyoneâ€|

Well, except the whispering deaths. They loved a good sheep now and then. Though they oftentimes ignored them in favour of some nice sandstone.

"Yes! Astrid! The one you're betrothed to, and who you're looking to break the engagement with!"

"What!?" He asked, completely taken aback. "I have no intention of-these are not for me!"

Well, admittedly, at one point, they had also been partially for Astrid. If she had shown to be reluctant to keep their contract, he would have presented her with Fish's findings and asked her to chose which one was most advantageous to her. But she really, really, wasn't looking like she wanted to break their contract last night. More like she wanted to break his resolve on her maidenhead- no, no, he wasn't going there.

"Ahem, no, not for me," he finished lamely to a rather sceptic looking Fishlegs.

"Oh?" he said archly. "And who would they be for, then, some other person who is unwillingly engaged and also happened to live in the vicinity of this village and / or archipelago?"

"Yeeeess," Hiccup replied leadingly, folding his arms in an equal stance. Fishlegs narrowed his eyes at him.

"Are you telling me you're serious, and not pulling my leg?"

"I'm the one with the handle," Hiccup replied, gesturing towards the

peg-shaped base. Fishlegs snorted, then schooled his features. "You're telling me you don't know?"

"Should I know?"

"Yes! It's about â€|" Hiccup slapped his forehead. "I can't tell you if you don't know. It's politics, and I'd get your wife into trouble."

"My wife!?" Fishlegs began to hyperventilate and Meatlug came up to rub her snout against him. "You mean Ruffnut asked you for those and -"

"NO!" Hiccup said, waving his hands urgently. "They're not for her, but she knows and I can't tell you." He sighed, suddenly tired. "Look, it's nothing bad, ok? Not for you at least. Ask Ruff, she'll probably tell you if you straight up ask."

"So, she's been keeping secretsâ€|" he said, sounding disappointed. Hiccup waved his hand in dismissal.

"Not her choice, Fish. Like I said, Politics, and if you show her that you know already, she'll probably tell you." Hiccup paused, resting against a boulder. "She's probably been dying to tell you. But â€| she couldn't. Just tell her I told you everything. She'll tell you then."

Fishlegs still looked put out, so Hiccup sighed tiredly. He really, really hated this sort of thing; really.

"They're for Tuff," Hiccup said at last. Fishlegs blinked. "His clan are roping him into something that's downright cruel and fairly pointless. And we're trying to get around it so he can be with Cami." Hiccup scowled. "And that didn't sound vaguely over-emotional and right out of a sappy saga. Gods, the air of Berk is doing strange things to my head."

Or the smell of Astrid's hair. He hadn't known she used honey ointment when she washed it until they'd started sharing the ba- not going there.

"I think it's not Berk's airâ€| just Astrid," Fishlegs told him shrewdly.

"Ack," he replied eloquently. The bushes on the far side shook again, and Hiccup glowered at them. "You are not getting any salmon this week!" He sighed again. Thor and Odin, everyone thought it was a good idea to make fun of him. And just why had Astrid sewn these pants so tight? She'd had his measurements down perfectly for the suede trousers, but this leather one certainly wasn't giving him any room. At least this blue tunic was decently long enough to hide his â€| whatever. "Let's get on with it, shall we? I still have to get back to the village to check out Clover and Stormfly, and I heard Grugg say that his nightmare was also acting up around Hoark's; all aggressive-like. I've never been out and about much in the Winter, so I'm guessing this is normal dragon behaviour that I missed, but I'm not comfortable letting it just get by." He shrugged uncomfortably. "And I've been getting enough glares from the general populace of the village for the dance fiasco. Astrid forgave me, but apparently they didn't." He shrugged, a little sadly. "This â€| is Berk. I

guess I should have expected no less after the whole 'hero' thing wore off."

"I'm sure it will pass," Fishlegs said, though he didn't look convinced himself. "After all, you only brought up a bogus excuse not to dance with your promised and went out hopping with another girl ten minutes later."

"Thank you for summing that up," he intoned. "And it wasn't a bogus excuse; and the 'hopping', as you put it, really didn't help any." He shook his leg out. "This mother of Loki still hasn't healed."

It was true. Despite the excruciating pain, the stupid sore hadn't closed yet, and worst still, it had expanded to the point where the irritated skin was beginning to redden around his stitches. He'd have to get Toothless to do that again soon if the situation didn't get any better, and even though a part of him still hated to admit it, he couldn't wait for this stupid Thing to be over, at this point. Astrid was so good as this sort of thing, with her (surprisingly) gentle handsâ€| and now that she'd said the word 'mother' in that tone, he wasn't sure he had a problem with it anymore.

In fact, saying that word in that tone gave him all sorts of ideas, and suddenly the horror he'd imagined for years of Astrid surrounded by tiny children didn't look so bad if he thought the children were his, and given willinglyâ€|

"... looked at, really, have you taken it to Goethi?"

"Huh, wha?" he blinked, rehearing it in his head before nodding. He could not avoid Fishlegs giving him a look with the - ack, the wiggle-brows. "Yes, yes, it's been looked at. I honestly know I should stay off it and leave it uncovered to heal, but that won't happen till the Thing is over. I'll just have to buck up and stop being aâ€|" he smirked to himself. "...wuss."

"Oh wellâ€|"

"Now, this is the list of rocks we have to find, in those proportions." He handed Fishlegs the parchment. "Seriously, don't let anyone see that. It's coded so it looks like rock strata, but there are a couple of blacksmiths who would kill for it - I know, they tried - so guard it, ok? And don't give it to Gobber! I wouldn't mind him knowing, but he can't keep a secret ifâ€| well, sort of. He kept me beingâ€| me, and all, but that was once. For the rest, he can't seem to go tell someone fast enough when he knows he shouldn't."

"I get it, no showing to people or leaving it laying about." Fishlegs diligently looked over it, then folded it carefully inside his tunic. "Now, soap-stone first?"

"Yeah, with a little bit of lava rock. Those are the the two we need the mostâ€|"

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I have failed the Bachdel test rather badly till now...

Remember how I told you that the titles were important!

Some mentions of physical love.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 13 - Where we meet_

**We're fascinated by the words - but where we meet is in the silence behind them.**

• _**Ram Dass**_

Snotlout almost felt guilty. Almost.

Hiccup was looking dead on his feet, and his hair was slightly singed. The Thing talk had been only an hour long, but only because some of the people from Hopeless and TrollGutts wanted some nice dragon-expert time in the arena. And they got it alright.

Snotlout had been there to help - of course he had; his cousin was never going to be in tight corners again without him helping anymore - and the session had gone well. They didn't have dragons young enough to pair with the tiny Spit boy, and his dad had said he didn't want any Terrors in the house, so the boy would have to return later to be properly bonded, but the men from TrollGuts had both favoured a pair of Timberjacks they'd captured only last week, and had been completely taken by the dragons and their uses in the densely forested island they came from.

Then the yellow gronkle had flown into the village, and it'd all gone to Hel's realm.

Well, it would have, but Hiccup just did an awesome thing with his fingers on its jaw and it went down. Still, a few of the stupid, stupid people around the village were still glaring at him for absolutely no reason (yeah, so he had a public fight with Astrid - two, if you counted Astrid yelling at him the morning after - and apparently there was some wager going, but Snotlout was on the way to fix that, and it was none of their business!), but he'd gotten the wild dragon under control so impressively quickly and with such seemingly little effort that the whole dragon thing had been sold to the other tribes before he could say 'mead'.

And now Hiccup looked really tired. And Astrid did too.

And she was covered in mud from head to toe, and Hiccup was giving her these looks yeah, tired or not, it was going to happen, now. At least Astrid had left her laundry basket with her mum. She'd kill Snotlout if that got dirty, he just knew it.

"Are you sure it's in there?" Hiccup asked once they arrived at the designated hut. Astrid peered inside at the darkness, when Snotlout

pretended to edge the door open.

"Yeah, I herded it in here, but it bit me and I couldn't get it out," he lied.

"And why did you want us both?" Hiccup asked, nonplussed. "Me and you could have done it."

"Are you kidding?" he moaned. "Dragons don't like me, man. This one's a baby zippleback, and it almost took my hand off. You two are good at this. You deal with it."

"Ok, ok, fineâ€| and you call ME a wuss," Hiccup said, addressing the last part to Astrid. Snotlout took offense at that, and decided he'd make Hiccup get him a new flail for the trouble, later; ungrateful git.

"Well, you're mine," she replied. Huh. This was looking better already, and he hadn't even locked them in yet. He was a genius, he came up with the best ideas.

No need to give the stupid dragon credit in his head.

"Are you sure you left all your weapons out?" he asked. Astrid glared at him.

"Now you know more than us?" she said huffily.

"It's just, it's tiny, Astrid." He was going to pay for this, sooo hard. But she'd been making her weakness for tiny things pretty obvious lately. "I think it's probably already scared to hear us talking in there. So best to drop all the weapons."

He had no idea it would work so well, especially when Hiccup put his endorsement on it. And then they were stepping into the dark, dark hut, and Snotlout shut the door and bolted it right away.

"Snotlout?"

"What the- Snotlout!"

"You're staying in there until you make up!" he yelled at them boldly, folding his arms at the door. Toothless came up beside him, carrying rabbits in his mouth, and grinned around them at the yelling voices coming from the hut.

"- boil you alive, you stupid son of a-"

"Loki's balls! Ow!"

"Hiccup!"

Snotlout snickered. It WAS dark in there.

"Let's leave them to it," Snotlout whispered. The dragon nodded, prizes still in his jaw. "We need to go tell Thuggory anyway. Say, any chance one of thoseâ€|" A growl. "Never mindâ€|"

"Well, that's great. Ow!"

"Hiccup, where?"

"Ow! That's my foot." There was a bumping sound. "Astrid, are you alright?"

"I don't know. My hip's not enjoying itself! wait, maybe I found a shelf." A rattling of falling objects followed, and some cursing.

"Hmm, wait, keep talking so I'll know where you are."

"Give me a moment, I think I found an - Aha!"

There was a flare, and Astrid blinked at the sudden light in her fingers. With watering eyes, she held the candle stump up and looked at her surroundings; luckily for them both, she always carried some flint in her hip pouch.

They were in a tiny one-room shed, and the only light was coming from the cracks in the door and planking. Astrid quickly found a dish that looked like it had been a pot-plate before, and put the candle into it before the wax could burn her. There was precious little candle left to hold it by, anyway.

"You think there is any dragon in here?"

"I think we've been duped," Hiccup said with a tired pout. He was blinking owlishly, that perennial stain of fatigue under his eyes looking even more pronounced in the stark contrast between the candlelight and the dark surroundings. "If there was a baby dragon in here!" He seemed to consider it for a moment, his eyes flicking about before they narrowed in concentration. He reached for the nearest wall and knocked. First once, gently, and twice, and kept increasing the taps in number and strength until he huffed a sigh and folded his arms in annoyance. "No. No baby dragons."

"And if it answered, you'd have told it to come in?" she said with some humour. He gave her a look under his lashes, and she couldn't stop the giggle.

"I'm glad you find it amusing, mi'lady," he said, and she tried her hardest to contain more mirth, though it was a losing battle. He began looking around, and she obligingly held the candle higher.

"Now, we'd better start trying to see if there's any other opening in this hut, because banging on that door got us nowhere. Can you see any - Whoa!"

Astrid stared for a second, as one moment Hiccup was standing right in front of her, and the next he had sort-of collapsed backwards. The next second she was rushing forward, horror imagines of a collapsed floor and injured Hiccup almost making her topple over a chair lying on its side.

There wasn't any collapsed floor - just a collapsed Hiccup.

"Did you just fall over while standing still?" she asked, staring down at him. He'd landed half against the wall he'd been knocking

against, shoulder blades resting against the bottom corner as the rest sprawled on the ground, his arms up and his chin against his chest. He lookedâ€|

His hair and the shadows hid his now-defined jaw, and from this angle, his face looked just as long as the one he'd warn as a child, hair going every which way and framing those large green eyes that were looking up at her sheepishly.

He looked like Hiccup. Her Hiccup. The one she'd known all her life, who fell over his own feet, dropped things and tried very hard not to stumble over his words. The Hiccup she'd thought about and remembered for five years; prayed for, cursed, hated and longed for. The gentle, kind boy who she'd been friends with as a child and cast away for a stupid reason.

Not that she minded the tall, strapping man who'd come back but â€| sometimes, when he had all that â€| Cat tongue attitude on, with the steely determination and the no-nonsense voice, it was hard to see the boy she'd waited for there. And she knew it was only normal for him to change, to grow up and be a man, but for everyone else it had happened before her eyes, a day at a time, while Hiccup had left a boy and in a blink come back a person the village looked at for guidance.

Of course, no sane woman would complain about this man. The new unyielding quality of his voice had actually always been there - no one had taken any notice of it unless he was insulting them - and who wouldn't like looking up at that jaw? Not to mention, her mother just had to pass next to the Arena earlier to see how her 'dear son-in-law' was doing; yeah, right. But she had made the right decision to sew these kid-skin trousers so tight. The man just had to bend down to be on Spit's eye-level too, and Baldr be praised if his arse wasn't a work of art worth gracing the halls of Asgard. Or her bed.

Erk. The only problem with that had been those three hideous, horrid barmaids who had also been looking. Horrid beasts, staring at another woman's arse. Man. Man's arse. Whatever â€| Lauga, Ginna and Ingrid. She had to remember their names later so she could set their hair on fire. At least Tuff had been glaring hateful daggers at them all too.

But here was her Hiccup, scowling up at her with his arms still raised and that silly expression on his face.

"Erâ€| a little help?" he asked awkwardly when she persisted in just looking at him, and she just burst out laughing. Then he pouted - of course he did - so she set the plate the the candle down on the floor and straddled his thighs. He gave an 'urk', scooting to sit up straighter and looking at her with wide eyes, so she put her wrists on his shoulders.

"You're still Hiccup," she said happily, ignoring how nonsensical it must seem to him.

He didn't disappoint. "Thank you," he said flatly. "I thought my name was Bertha this morning, imagine that?"

She snorted at him. She didn't know if it was his eyes, or the fact

that they were alone in a dark hut (oooh, they were alone in a dark hut!) but she scooted slightly forwards and watched his face contort for her in utter delight. He went stiff and - yes, yes, the tight leather trousers certainly needed a brother. Or twelve.

"Astrid?"

She shook her head to get rid of her own wandering thoughts. Ah, this man, so much more dangerous for her sanity than a dragon or an axe-wielding maniac.

"I just meant," she started, then stopped, biting her lip. Was she to tell him this? Was it too much, too soon, or too strange? Wellâ€| she wasn't going to be scardy, not anymore. Not her! And â€| he'd told her he was going to make the obvious more obvious, wasn't he? Well, she could too. "I just meant that, you've changed so much. Sometimes it doesn't feel like you're the same person. But then you do stuff like this and â€| she nodded at him.

"Aand the gesturing to all of me. I'd missed that," he said in a wry tone. "Did I really â€| change that much?"

She nodded. "And don't pretend you don't know," she replied. "Or that you don't notice. I know a story of a certain rafter that hid you from certain Bog cousins."

"Oh Thor," he said, hiding his face in her shoulder and making her insides flutter madly. She was so, so glad she had not worn her armour today. Though honestly, she could have had an excuse to bring it to him later at the forge, with all the mud tarnishing itâ€|

Ah, next time. There was plenty of mud to be had in the Winter.

"I'm never living that down, am I?"

"Well, let me see," she said, pretending to think about it while not getting distracted by his warm breath down her shoulder and his soft hair against her cheek. "You warded off women who were not me, while you were far away, and didn't know you were engaged to meâ€| I'd say that wins you points."

She been expecting an awkwardly flirty remark, but instead he stiffened and moved away. Belatedly, she realised that she had forgotten all about Sepha. And now, she certainly knew that it was a female name - he hadn't confirmed her to be a dead wife or a lover, but â€|

She pushed it aside; Later. "And â€| Remember, Astrid, she told herself. More obvious. "And we're here for who knows how long, and â€| I want to make one thing clear, Hiccup." He looked at her with slight hesitation as he frowned. "What I said that day - the day before the Red Death came? I still mean it. If you want to â€| if â€| Sometimes, Hiccup, I'm really afraid that I'm tying you down."

"What?"

She moved away from him, arms falling into her lap as she scooted backwards, almost but not quite sitting on his knees. She'd admitted

it. She was afraid, and she'd admitted it to him. "I know you had a life out there, Hiccup. And I know that you miss it. Don't lie to me." He closed his mouth, his eyes clouded. "I know you had Fishlegs look up ways to break the engagement, and if that's what you wantâ€!"

Hiccup stared at her for a moment with wide eyes, then they narrowed in annoyance. "So much for keeping secrets," he muttered, biting his lip. "Those weren't for usâ€!" he sighed, looking at her beseechingly. His face said enough of how suddenly worried he was with an urgent sort of panic. In that moment, she realised that trusting him had been the right thing to do; she'd never felt so happy to be right. "You know Cami's situation."

"Oh!" She blinked, feeling stupid. Of course, that made so much sense; Tuff and Cami's relationship once again intruded upon her mind, making her want to scoot closer to Hiccup. It wasn't worth the pretence of not caring that being a warrior was supposed to bring, somehow, when Hiccup was this close, and when she could see someone else's unhappiness so very starkly. It was a new notion, but she was beginning to realise that she could be a warrior and a woman at once.

She nodded to Hiccup in understanding, and he gave a relieved sigh - but she wasn't quite ready with the topic yet. She wanted the obvious to be so obvious even Snotlout could understand it. So with a caress to his cheek, she forged on.

"Hiccup." He looked up at her, and she held his eyes steadily as she started. "I see you looking up at the sky, and I see the looks you exchange with Toothless. I know you miss being able to â€| be your own master. I need to know that..."

She swallowed, looking down again. She couldn't quite bring herself to look him in the eye when she said this, because â€| what if he said yes?

"And I know that -" she sighed, impatient with herself. Why couldn't she be eloquent like him? When had eloquence become more important than a punch and a straight statement? "You left, once. You can do it again. And I'm â€| I don't want to hold you back if that is what you really want, but at the same time, Iâ€|"

"Hey!" His hands came up to her face. She shook them off and refused to look up. "I â€| this is â€|" He huffed. His thumbs made circles on her cheeks, flicking dried mud away in a scaly cascade down into their laps. "You think this isn't a little unbelievable for me, too? I go away for five years, thinking Berk is better off for it. And then I have to come back because â€| because you're all in danger. You think it was easy, to come here? When I'd left like that?"

Astrid felt his tone strike a chord in her heart, almost like a confirmation of what she'd been fearing even though he hadn't voiced it.

"I know. It must have been painful, and difficult, and it's why I'm saying-"

"Astrid," he didn't sound angry, but somehow she felt chastised. Urk,

this manâ€| "It was the best decision I ever made. I don't regret it, ok? Just, sometimes, I have to remind myself that it's real, and that it's not going away. And some other times, it just gets so â€| so â€| overwhelming, trying to be dad's son and your â€| " he lowered his voice, "promised."

"It doesn't have to be," she tried to reassure, his eyes flickering in the candlelight telling her she wasn't managing very well. "I don't want you to do any big, impossible thing to prove â€| I don't want you to prove anything. Just be Hiccup." His eyes went wide. Then disbelieving. So she punched him and ignored his whining. "I'm serious. Hiccup is who I want. Hiccup is enough." He just blinked at her, and she gave him a smile, hoping she hadn't said something stupid. Well, stupid or not, she wanted to say it. He'd better get used to it. When he continued to say nothing, it made her feel utterly jittery and nervous, and she had to stop herself from punching him in the face. "You really weren't - I mean, you meant it, the other night, right?" Astrid asked before she could stop herself. Odin, he'd just bared his soul to her and she couldn't let this go? But he wasn't talking. "That you don't mind â€| this." She waved her hand between them. He gave a crooked, terrified smile.

"I was really hoping to make it work, actually."

"Yeah? Even though â€| " She looked him properly in the eyes - she wasn't a coward. So what if she was feeling as if her heart was going to drop out of her chest if he said the wrong thing? And so what if he said it was hard to be her promised sometimes, and it hurt like nothing she'd ever heard? That was probably all the punching business. And if her heart did fall out, then she'd pick it up, stuff it back in and deal with it. He was â€| he was right. This was something worth risking for. Ask about Sepha. Ask. "Even though I'm just a fisherman's daughter, you're ok?" Erk, coward. She could have slapped herself.

"Who told you that!" He looked utterly outraged. A part of her felt vindicated. The other one was groaning at his sudden attempt to get up - which she didn't allow. "Did Madfoot approach you? Did he dare? Because I swear, if he even tried to breathe your way after all the trouble he's caused, I-"

"No, no." That cut him short, but his face was still red with anger and outrage. She felt both cared for and manhandled, somehow. As if he she couldn't throw an axe at him and claim harassment if that dared to insinuate and approach her himself â€| still, it was admittedly nice to see that look on his face on her account.

Argh, how did people handle being married? How had her mother? It was terribly complicated, it almost felt like you were putting your insides on the line all the time, and then you caught yourself not saying things because you second and triple guessed how they would be received. It was murder.

"Heather told me," she informed him. "She said that I should know what Madfoot'd said about me. That you'd gotten him back at the meeting but that I should know I'd incurred a personal insult." She nudged him. "And that you said you wanted to make it up to me?"

"Is that a not-so-subtle hint that you want another new weapon?"

"Hatchet!"

"Erk. Fine."

When he gave her that wobbly smile again, she couldn't help returning it.

"And for the all the restâ€|" She leaned forward and kissed him briefly. "I'm not going anywhere, even if you make mistakes or say stupid things. Or go dance with other girls." He looked appropriately chastised, so she kissed his nose. "So don't worry about that."

"I'm still â€| me." He shrugged. "I'm still Hiccup. I still make messes, say stupid jokes, drop things - usually on people's feet - fall over because I'm standing on the only patch of moss in the room," he gestured towards the scraped off vegetation on his prosthetic.

"And that's a very good thing, Hiccup," she said, scooting forward more and grabbing his tunic.

"It wasn't for a very long time, Astrid," he replied sadly, and her heart felt like it would rip in two. It was her turn to take his face firmly in her hand and stroke his cheeks.

"That was our fault, not yours," she said, making sure her tone left no room for argument. "We didn't see how good you were. Not until you left. And that was our â€| my fault."

"Astrid, we weren't even friends anymore," Hiccup protested, his sharp brows coming down to cast shadows in the candle light.

"And who's fault was that!" she said angrily, pushing back slightly.

"Mine?"

"No, mine!" she yelled, folding her arms. She hadn't wanted to tell him this, really hadn't. But she was a coward if she didn't. And if she didn't get his forgiveness this time, then she wouldn't deserve it. "Don't you see? I stopped being your friend for such a stupid reason!"

"I don't â€| look, if you regret because I used to mess up, but I'm ok now, it's fine," he started, and she glared him into silence. Then punched his shoulder. "Ow!"

"Wuss," she said, though her affection was full of trepidation. "That's for thinking I'm some shallow little cunt who only likes Hiccup the Hero."

"Not what I meant; I still mess up! And â€| S'not my nameâ€|" he muttered rebelliously, rubbing his arm.

"Oh, pick one!" she replied, still yelling, and damn it all to Hel's teeth, she hadn't meant to tell him she was afraid of this, either! "Hiccup the Red Death's bane; Hiccup the dragon trainer; Hiccup the Negotiator." She went quiet and swallowed. "I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't afraid you could do better."

"I couldn't," he said strongly, and she shook her head vehemently in order to stop looking at his earnest face and stave off the melty feeling in her chest. This man!

"Hiccup, I may be the best warrior in our generation, but that's Berk. You could have any number of women of much higher standing and wealth among our allies." She swallowed, her throat suddenly thick, and in that moment realised just how much she cared for him. What if he hadn't realised this? What if he liked the idea? "When all is said and done, I'm really just a fisherman's daughter."

"I couldn't," he said again, and his gaze never faltered. "Remind me to tell Heather that if she was going to be a busy body, she may as well go all the way," he scowled and continued. "I said it in the meeting and I'm saying it to you. I don't want anyone else. I really don't, Astrid."

Her throat went dry. Frey forgive her, but she would have given her shield to this man right now if he hadn't had it already.

"I well same here," she replied in a thin voice. He gave her a wobbly, uncertain smile, and her eyes followed the movement of his throat as he swallowed nervously.

"And you're at least the daughter of the fisherman king. He's one of my dad's second generals and leads the fishing fleet, Astrid. Madfoot was just being himself. An arsehole."

"Yes, right, ok!" she muttered, fingering her kransen. Her family was moderately wealthy. At least, she thought so. She'd never opened her dowry, so she had no idea. "And you're fine the way you are. So, you do stupid things, and you say silly things. I want it that way. I don't want you to try to be something else because I want this."

He gave her a shining, crooked smile. This time, when he moved forward and kissed her, there was something else in it, a different sort of heat that moved over her skin through the slow, gentle touches of his lips on hers, and when he fell back against the wall with bright eyes, her heart was beating so fast it almost hurt. Her lips still tasted of him, and the look he was giving her was so, so warm that-

Then he punched her shoulder gently.

"What?"

"So, you were going to tell me why we stopped being friends? As children, I mean." He ducked his head with a shy smile. "Because wow, I'd never thought you'd look my way after that time, and I could only dream that you would get jealous over me." He gave a laughing 'ow!' when she punched him in the chest, hard. Ooooh, only half his armour was on, and that chest looked like a nice area to explore. He grabbed her wrists in his large hands, and for some reason, the fact that he was able to hold her for a few moments until she calmed made her glad she was sitting already. "The last time you were jealous was when we were children and Ruffnut wanted to play the stepping game with me." His smile turned into a sad one. "And that one time I told you your hair was pretty, and Ruff wanted the compliment too. Then you started

not speaking to me very often, and..."

Astrid swallowed, the guilt coming back in droves. They had been friends - just a rag-tag team of young children, all more-or-less the same age, but Hiccup had been Astrid's special friend. They used to go exploring, used to go 'pillaging' and on adventures. Hiccup used to make up games for them to play - it was how she learned to read and count so well, because his games almost always were word or counting games.

And the step game. His arm around her back, her arm around his, their remaining fingers laced together at the front as they skipped through the numbered squares chalked into the ground while chanting a tune her mother had taught her. It had been her favourite game, and she'd never let anyone play it with them.

"You said something else, that day." He gave her a confused look. She sighed. "It was the end of the Spring Harvest. We were all in ribbons and flowers and â€œ| she touched her crusty, muddy hair unconsciously. "I had flowers in my hair, and you said I looked like a bride." He blinked at her, and blushed. She gave him a wry smile, but then looked down again. "It was something my mother said," Astrid admitted in a small voice. Five years of his absence had made the years prior, where he'd been there and she'd ignored him simply because he was Hiccup - and he was sometimes in the way, and she was _competitive_ - seem so stupid, so pointless. The guilt she had _not_ felt during those earlier years somehow made it worse. "We were little, and â€œ| mama and your mother were laughing about how you'd marry me someday." She snorted and shook her head, savouring the fond memory before the next part heaped the shame back on. "I said I didn't want to get married. That I wanted to be a shield maiden." She met his eyes after rolling her own. "Shows what I knew."

"I always thought that would happen," he shrugged. "Or maybe hoped?" He gave her a crooked smile when she raised a brow. "Eh, maybe I was hoping you'd be unmarried when I came back, and I could sweep you away with my rugged good looks."

She snorted again, and let him pull her closer, his palms cradling her back.

"Let me finish?" she asked quietly. He nodded, his face going serious again. "Well, your mother laughed, and mine said â€œ| mum said that you'd have me if you wanted me. You were the chief's son."

She swallowed.

"Ohâ€œ| "

"It made me so angry," she ploughed on. "I thought we were friends, and then suddenly I find out you could take away my future just by wanting to marry me." She looked down, feeling the emotion all over again. "I didn't even understand it all back then. All I knew is that I wanted to be a warrior woman, like the Bogs, and the Bogs didn't get married. I thought one excluded the other."

"Astridâ€œ| "

"And _then_ I was so horrid to you, in the arena, and I literally drove you off the island. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." She leaned

forward, letting her forehead drop on his armoured shoulder. "I'm so, so sorry." She had so much to make up to him.

"Hey," he simply put his arms around her and gathered her up - and she would never, ever admit it, but in that moment, she felt safe, and cared for. She'd go kill a few trees and elks later to make sure the inner-warrior hadn't turned to mush, but right now, she needed nothing more than this.

And it was ok, wasn't it? If it was Hiccup? Yes, it was.

"I'm sorry, too," he said, holding her closer. "I was afraid of what my father would do to Toothless back then - really afraid - and dragon training, and all that attention I felt I shouldn't getâ€| and it made you so mad." He kissed her temple slowly, maybe to see if he could, and then did it again when she nudged herself closer. "I think, a part of me ran away because I was scared of all that, too. I wanted to make my father proud, and when I thought I never could, and that you would neverâ€|"

"Hiccup," she whispered. "Just say it."

"I thought you'd never look at me," he sighed, and the first blow was painful, a rush of emotion that accompanied the sad tone in his voice that spoke of so much loneliness. She had looked. She had - so much that it had been like someone took a piece out of her that had always been there when he left. And ... So he had lied to her, that day, hadn't he? When they had been sharing a glowing moment in the dawn light as they 'met' for the first time in five years. He had left, at least in part, because of her; but he hadn't wanted to tell her then, hadn't wanted to mar that moment. The thought was so bitter-sweet.

The second was a rush of unexpected feeling; could she be - could she, Astrid, be - the most beautiful woman in â€| she shook herself. Not now.

"I was young. Younger than you, in my head," she admitted. "I just saw axes and dragons and bringing my family glory as their only girl-child. I wanted to be special. I was stupid."

"Just young. So was I," he admitted. "I just - I don't want to dwell on it anymore. We were young, we made mistakes. Everyone does. But we have this now, and I, um, it's important enough to keep." Yup, her insides were made of mush now. She was going to have to go break rocks with her head before she felt like a real warrior again. Still worth the bruise. "So, I â€| forgiven?" Astrid blinked at him. "For running away like an arse and making you feel so bad."

"Oh, yes. Of course," she said. She moved back enough to look him in the eyes. "But I don't think I'll ever forgive myself for that, Hiccup."

"Then I'll remind you every day that I forgive you, ok?" he replied. Green eyes were the most beautiful thing in the world, she decided.

The candle guttered out, and they both groaned.

"We're idiots. We should have used that light to look for a way out,

then had the heart-to-heart after we murdered Snotlout."

"We can always wait for him to let us out," Hiccup sighed.

"Are you sure he'll remember?" she asked, her skeptic tone saying it all. Hiccup groaned.

"At least we're in good company," he intoned, letting his head fall back with a thunk. The sparse light in the shed came through cracks in the wood and the door, and once her eyes adjusted, she could just see the outlines of his body, his shining armour, skin, and twinkling eyes.

Suddenly, there was something altogether lacking in the innocence of their embrace. All the beautiful things he'd said, the slow, heart-racing way in which he'd kissed her earlier coagulated in the dark so that she couldn't take her eyes off him. Watching his throat bob as he sighed and swallowed was simply the last straw.

She was kissing his neck in the same slow, sensuous manner before she knew it, and he stiffened and squeaked underneath her as she scooted forward all the way, seating herself properly straddling his lap. This was the most lascivious, wanton position she had ever been in, and by the gods it felt fantastic and terrifying. She pressed against him harder, kissing up his jaw until she found his mouth and savouring the sudden groan he made when she accidentally pressed her hips into his as she shifted.

His hands were suddenly scalding, one ghosting against her thigh and the other in her hair. That chest was begging to be explored and she slipped questing fingers under his leather armour, making him go stiff and gasp, and then his hand was grasping her thigh in a way that made her squeal before she could stop herself.

His lips kissed around her face before they found hers again in the dark, and then all her skin came alive as he licked her lower lip and brought it into his mouth. His thumb brushed her ear as his fingers scraped her scalp, and she couldn't contain the load moan that escaped her. Bringing one hand from beneath his armour, she caught the back of his head and brought him closer, and when his tongue invaded her mouth, she could do nothing but let him, her limbs going almost boneless as the feeling of his tongue on hers spread fire through her insides. She wanted to be close to him. Closer. He had become so very important, so much, that she needed to cancel out any distance between them in that moment.

Her skin felt hot, throbbing like another heart was beating everywhere just below the surface. His breath on her face, the smell of him and the salty taste of his skin drove her on, down a path she did not know, but hoped to travel with him soon. As his hand climbed up her thigh, she pressed herself harder against him, and before she knew it, her body was undulating of its own accord against - mmm, yes, the tight leather pants were definitely a good idea!

"Ast- Asta," he moaned, the hand rising to her hip-bone and pushing her away slightly. "Asta, please!"

"Hiccup," she moaned, frustrated for reasons she could not exactly pinpoint in her rushed and hungry mind. He groaned even more deeply and dove to kiss her neck, leaving tiny bites that made her shudder

and press against him harder. She wasn't completely innocent, between her married brothers in the old Hall, and Ruff's none-too-subtle stories, but she could never imagine that someone's touch could turn her skin into living lightning, his every caress feeling like Mjolnir was hammering at her senses. "Oh Hiccup, please!"

"I made you an oath," he moaned, pushing back again, breathing so deeply, literally pleading. "Please, Asta!"

She groaned, tearing herself away from his arms and moving backwards, her skin feeling chilled the moment his hands fell away. Her center was throbbing disconsolately, and she knew even in the dark that he was probably in agony. She'd overheard her brothers' talk enough times to know why his breathing was so rapid, and the little she could see of his face so scrunches up.

Oh, Freya, but if he threw his head back like that, she wouldn't be responsible for!

"Hiccup, you're worried about me getting with-child, right?" The noise of rain suddenly registered in her mind, and she wondered how long it had been coming down, and how long she had been entangled in his arms like that. And how long it would be before she could be there again. "Well, mum offered me herbs. Said they would stop you know. So if you want, if you!"

"Astrid," he said, curling both hands around her shoulders and keeping her put. The only thing she cared about at that moment was how warm they were, and how much she wished he would move them lower. And on her front.

That thought seemed to break her out of her haze more than his tone, she suddenly flushed, and chuckled in a strange new form of embarrassment. She shifted uncomfortably, her body still hotly alive and her breath short. She knew that if he pulled her in, she would certainly not refuse him, and that thought elated and sobered her.

"Asta, we still have to speak of a few things." he swallowed, her eyes catching it in the dark, but her mind focussed further.

Sepha. They still had to talk about Sepha.

"And no offense to your mother's remedies, but .. she had eight children, Astrid. I don't think they work very well."

Astrid blinked, then burst out laughing, her emotions still high and violently galing within her.

"They were trying for a girl-child, Hiccup; me." She poked him in the side, and he yelped. She enjoyed the sound of his voice a little bit too much. "That's where the large expectations came from, and all. Couldn't disappoint them after they waited so long."

"Would explain many things! the drive, the mad competitiveness, the-ow! Violence!"

"Wuss," she said, and she was kissing him again before she knew it.

"Mmm-mmm," he protested, pushing her firmly away by the shoulders. Their lips separated with a horridly lewd smack, and she was laughing before she could stop herself.

"Sorry," she chuckled, apology a lot more lighthearted than their earlier ones.

"You know, I don't quite think I'll make you that hatchet. Not with all this torture; I don't think you deserve it."

"Hmm," she replied, a laugh held in behind her tight lips. "I see," and then she did laugh, because her mind was blank except for the smell and feel of him. It wasn't quite fair that he was still so eloquent, even now. "Well, one day, I'll leave you speechless. Then I'll consider it torture."

"Gya," he replied, going boneless, and she chuckled. A silence settled on them as their breaths mingled and calmed, her body still warm, but shuddering as it registered how cold the temperature inside the tiny hut had become, and that incessant dripping sound was

"Drops?" She blinked in Hiccup's direction as he had echoed her, and both of them stood - albeit reluctantly - and moved towards the noise. "Here, hand me thatâ€¢ yeah, that chair." The light inside the room had dimmed, but their eyes had grown used to the blacks of their eyelids. Her lips gave a throb at the memory. The chair found its way into her hands, and she quickly pushed it upwards into the thatch. A fair bit of rotted straw came away, and much more light began to flood the little room, as well as rain and shingle. Hiccup quickly came up beside her to shield her and she elbowed him gently for it, but smiled. "Way out," she said happily.

Dropping the chair, she was about to climb on it when her common sense told her it wasn't a good idea. Hiccup laced his fingers together instead, and she stepped into them, reaching up.

"I don't reach," she hissed, and Hiccup first lowered her, then raised her up once more to stand on his shoulder. She hoped he didn't remember the yelp she made, it was undignified.

She began pushing the half-rotted wood and thatch away as fast as she could, hissing as splinters made their way into her palm. "Are you alright down there?"

"The view's fantastic," he replied in a teasing tone, and then grabbed her ankles more strongly. "And if you kick me, we'll both fall over."

"I'll hurt you for it later," she replied cheerfully.

"Never a doubt, mi'lady â€¢ now, there! Great!" Astrid took the boost he gave her, and pulled herself up through the hole she'd made, getting instantly soaked by the rain and almost slipping off. "Be careful!"

"Of course," she chuckled, her mind still in that hut, and then flying to an idea; A quiet spot like this, in the woods, was perfect for two people to meet on the sly. Two people who weren't supposed to meet, especially. "You know," she called down to him through the

hole. The light of dusk was fading fast, but she could still see him clearly, hair getting plastered to his face by the rain and making him look like a half-drowned hatchling. Any thoughts of devious plans took a backseat for the moment. "I could totally just leave you there, mister 'refuse-a-lot'."

"Astrid," he said, pouting at her, and she knew she'd lost at once. With a laugh, she gave a sharp whistle, then two others just in case, but Stormfly's answering squaks could be heard from wherever she was. Making her way down the roof slowly, she continued to whistle until she heard the gust of her nadder's wings, and Stormfly carefully helped her the last few yards to the ground with her snout.

She instantly walked round to open the door, and immediately dropped the wooden bar with a hiss; apparently she had more splinters than she thought.

"You alright?" he asked right away. She almost frowned before a thought occurred to her.

"These need seeing to," she said casually.

"I'll medicate them for you," he said as she knew he would.

"Good," she said with a grin. "Then you can wash my hair."

"Huh?!"

She allowed him to hop onto her nadder in front, as she could not steer, and chuckled quietly to herself at his expression. Someday, she was going to tell him it was Thuggory who told her of his weakness for her hair, and then sit back and watch.

=0=

**Their second 'talk', a long but necessary one. Hiccup was not the only one who could not reconcile the young person they had known with the adult they are now falling in love with, especially after five years away. And of course, Astrid is more than a little gunge-ho about getting her hands on the goods.

>

And I also expanded on the mentions of childhood friendship that had been dropped in Becoming too. I hope you enjoyed them. These things, after all, make sense to a young Viking girl's mind.

16. Glaciers

The thing about politics is; it's a secret.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 14 - Glaciers_

**Glaciers are delicate and individual things, like humans. Instability is built into them.**

â€• _**Will Harrison**_

Wolftooth sat with Stoick, Bertha, Brawlnife, Bile and Footsore in the empty guest hall. They looked at one another in worry, then diverted their eyes to the maps in front of them.

"Do we have time to send scouts to the islands; get more dragon reinforcements?" Brawlnife asked, scratching his hairy chin. The man was, for once, sober as the day he was born.

"We can, but it wouldn't be wise to do it before the Thing's end, at least," Stoick said, rubbing a hand down his face.

"True," Bertha replied, "but we can just say we're sending out a few to see how things are going back home to prepare for the return of our own Snoggletog, and making sure the rest of the folk on our island are playing nice."

"Aye, but it'd take a day to get there, a day to rally good troops, and then a day to come back. Even with the wind in our favour as it's been, there will be little we can done once they land."

"Berk's not that defenseless," Stoick replied, still frowning in thought. "But that damned child is leading an army of maniacs. I doubt he'll be able to control them for long."

"Not sure about that," Bile growled, staring angrily at the maps. "May he be damned to live the rest of eternity under Hel's right heel. I was good friends withâ€!"

"We all were," Footsore commented, his own voice an angry snarl. "And I should have seen this coming. Our isle is the closest. Though I think, in all honesty, that there was foul play going on with those Outcasts."

"If it is as you sayâ€! we have a serious problem." Wolftooth shook his head. "And we still have to decide whether to inform our heirs right away."

"I'm all for't," Footsore said. "Son's in charge of the Army already. But fat lot of good we Trollguts'll do, with no dragons to make the journey there and back in a day. Even if the beasties tug the boat, we still have to go around the skols and reefs."

"Aye, same for us Snailsnorts," Bile said. "Hopeless' closer, but then my boy's only a bairn yet, and what good would a rider missing do, an'a fleet a day away?"

"Well, there are many things that a fleet coming from the back, or the side, can do," Brawlnife said. "I'll wager that boy of yours would have something to contribute to this, Stoick. Seen the plans for the Red Death attack he pulled, and Freyr is on his side when it comes to traps."

"We vote, then," Stoick sighed resignedly. As the hosting chief, he

got to be the one who called most of the shots. "We inform the heirs?"

"Aye," they all said, save Bile. The others nodded to him in understanding; the eight-year-old would be going to a safe place - in fact, perhaps he could be taken back to Hopeless altogether. Wolftooth gave Stoick a look, and Stoick nodded. They'd already agreed that Hiccup would be informed differently.

"We inform the generals?"

"I will not," said Wolftooth, and everyone nodded.

"I say aye, 'specially 'ere on Berk," Brawlnife rumbled. "Gotta make sure everyone who's who knows to start carting everyone off te' safety if things go down the path of the ice-giants." He slammed the table. "Ah, Hel take them all. Doing this at this time of year, too."

"S' the best time. Nobody expects it," Footsore said. "Awright then, I'll bite, and get the fleet ready, somehow."

"Nobody expects it, but then that's because t'is a difficult time of year," Bertha replied thoughtfully. "Still, we can't rely on Thor and Ras to take them to Hel's gate. They both love a good brawl."

"And we'll give them one. Let's just make sure we come out on top."

"Well then, aye for the generals?"

"Aye," the all replied. Stoick sighed, and Wolftooth patted his large arm.

"We are in this together, Stoick. It could have been any one of us." Wolftooth stopped, beginning to grin. The other men and Bertha looked at him. "In fact, this may be rather good."

"Oh?"

"We need to rally the islands and make sure they're safe, but none of us have received any messages yet, and that's a sure sign that nobody back home's been disturbed on the way. Which is so, very, stupid."

"How so?" Brawlnife asked. "Seems like a good plan to me, to attack all'a chiefs while they're in one place."

"Oh, aye, on the surface," Wolftooth said. "But then what's to stop all the archipelago_ from attaching back? If even one of us gets away, it will be open war, and we are all allies. That will be a treatise broken, a first strike dealt with no provocation, and all the allied clans up against a few. I'd say we'd have had losses at the start if we didn't get this forewarning, but then we would have crushed the lot."

"Unless they have a backup plan," Bertha said warily. Wolftooth shrugged.

"They are surely to have it, but if this is any indication, it's

probably as crazy as the original. So Stoick, next Thing meeting, we go on as if nothing's happening; then, we meet after for a good 'ale' and a good 'talk'."

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Heather was enjoying herself in a spot of sun - it was truly something very rare this time of year. Particularly when it had snowed the night before, the first night without the wind ripping and howling at the huts. The air was shockingly cold, almost enough to snare the lungs and hold them hostage, but then she was swathed in about five layers of fur, and there was a blanket underneath her. She felt disgustingly pampered, and it helped feed into her sense of devious pleasure as all the other women around her bumped around with this task or the next.

Eh, they'd have the last laugh, in the end. Heather sighed as the goods began coming out, and her stomach started to revolt at the usually mouthwatering smell of fresh bread and fish to roast on the open fire, with vegetables in metal boxes to put on top of the flames and stew in their own juices, so she discretely hid her nose under one of the furs. Thuggory had better hope that this tiny Meathead was a boy, or that he could somehow find a way to gestate the next one, because she wasn't getting pregnant again.

"No way," Ruff said with a laugh. Her daughter was asleep, bundled up in furs, and she was attacking a chicken leg. "I thought Brunhilda was kidding."

"Nope," Astrid smiled deviously. She looked around and lowered her voice. "My hands are already healed, but I'm contemplating getting all my hair muddy somehow, again."

"I condone that plan," Heather sniggered. Cami joined in.

"You would, and so do I," Cami smirked. "And thanks for the â€| hint, earlier." Heather watched her pat her pocket, but she knew it had probably something to do with Tuffnut.

"Lalala, can't hear, don't have the interfer," Ruff said in an enthusiastic drawl, devious smile on her face. They were all eating and sewing. Astrid had finished working furiously at what looked like a pair of black boarskin trousers, and now was carving a design into a wooden pendant in a careful, precise hand. "You're really making it obvious, by the way," Ruffnut went on.

"What am I?" Astrid said, and though she didn't look up the smile on her face said everything.

"You're imagining your hands all over him every time he wears something you sewed for him."

"You blame her?" Brunhilda laughed, biting at an apple. "Ah, had I been twenty years youngerâ€|"

"That is disturbing on so many levelsâ€|" Astrid snorted.

"Oh, hush you," the elder woman replied with a wave of a hand, returning to darning someone's socks. "When you reach my age and your tits start sagging, you start to appreciate the ripeness of

youth."

"And his arse in those trousers is ripe enough to take a bite out o-"

"Eh, mine," Astrid remarked, frowning at Ruffnut, who snickered back.

"I want more details of this bath," Cami broke in. "Don't think you're escaping so easy."

"Oh well," Astrid said, her grin and her blush showing she wasn't all that reluctant to speak of her conquest. "So first he spends a good half hour taking the splinters out of my hands and folding them this way and that and being incredibly gentle about it."

"I'll bet that got you hot under the collar," Cami commented. Astrid's grin only widened.

"Oh, he'd gotten soaked on the way to our hall, so what does he do? Take the tunic off and stay in the trousers next to the fire as he fiddles with my hands. He's got fifty seven freckles on his right shoulder."

Heather burst out laughing with the rest. "Woman, whatever torture you put him through after that, he deserved it. He was practically provoking you!"

"Then he puts balm on my hands and wraps them up. For splinters! It was ridiculous," Astrid laughed, "And I shoo him off to take his own bath, but when he comes out, I drag him back in there because of course, I can't wash my hair with all the bandages and ointment."

"Oh precious baby Thor," Cami laughed, flopping onto her belly on the blanket and snickering helplessly. "If it was any other guy, I'd say he did it on purpose, but Hiccup? Oh, what I'd give to see the look on his face."

"It was worth most kingdoms," Astrid admitted.

"So what, you made him sit there and wash you all over? And then you left?"

"I'll bet there was more than 'soap foam' left in there," Heather snarked. Ruff gave her a devious grin.

"That's exactly what I did," Astrid replied with a chuckle. Heather looked at her shrewdly, and of course knew there was more to the story than she was saying. The girl had come to her hut that morning, to help her prepare for the day as the female host, something she'd done to try to save Heather from Thuggory's horrid aunt soon after she found out about the woman.

They had also needed to discuss the behaviour of their dragons. If Hiccup was right, it was both elating and worrying. What if they had to release them, to live together in the wild, in order to prevent separating the pair once the Thing was over and everyone returned home for Snoggletog?

The guest hut had been warm, and they'd spoken for a few hours until the she-beast woke up. They'd escaped the horrid old lady to come to the sewing picnic in the snow, and Heather was very glad to see the glow on Astrid's cheek. The other girl had been sad and conflicted, and Heather had hated seeing her like that. Astrid was a strong warrior, generous with her time and help, but she had had no clue how to handle her own heart - no surprise, really, when she was almost more of a crusty warrior than Cami. Though Cami was in a class of her own, really...

"It was hilarious," Cami herself went on with a devious smirk, and Heather realised they'd moved on to speak of something else. "This redhead daughter of a troll was standing there, weeds in her hair, thinking she's hot shit, and then she missed all the apples. She didn't get an arrow through a single one."

"Oh, how I would have liked to be there," Ruff said, looking up dreamily. "How badly did you rub it in?"

"How badly would you?" Cami replied, and Ruff gave her one of those signature crooked smirks that were utterly evil. "Exactly, sister. Her new nickname became 'sharpshot', and I can tell you that she's never been able to get half the muck out of her hair since she refuses to cut it out."

"Serves her right for challenging you, dear," Brunhilda stated with a matronly nod. "You don't just walk up and challenge an heir to a tribe if you know what's good for you. And this girl obviously had a few knots missing in her noggin, and not a few beads falling out of her ear."

"Oh, to have been there," Ruffnut said with a sigh. "I'd have liked to be your second, and give her a good pounding once you got bored of kicking her in the face."

Heather tittered with the rest, only half listening as the conversation turned to proper care for weaponry and the best way to kill and drain a hare when she noticed someone approaching.

"Um, are we waiting for someone?" she asked the other women. They turned to look at her, and then in the direction of her gaze. A girl - young, dressed well - was approaching them hesitantly.

"That's Sleet, Madfoot's daughter," Cami said in a hiss, and Heather saw Astrid's eyes go wide. Without a second thought, the blonde dropped her sewing, stood, and made her way towards the flinching girl. Heather (and everyone else) craned their necks to see Astrid begin talking to her, then grip her shoulders as she bent down to talk to the shorter girl more quietly.

"You think she'll kill her?" Ruff asked.

"I'm hoping for some hair-pulling, at least- what the, is she hugging her? Of all theâ€|" Cami grumbled.

"Girls, quiet," Brunhilda said as Astrid began to lead the apparently terrified girl to the rest of them.

"Maybe she's bringing her here so we can all beat the ever loving crap out of her; I call first dibs," Cami whispered.

"Girls," Astrid said, looking back at Sleet encouragingly. "This is Sleet. And she's got something really important to tell us."

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Hiccup had escaped to the forge that afternoon once the talks had relented. Astrid was nowhere in sight, which had been a bit of a let-down, as he'd been hoping to spend some more time with her. Snotlout hadn't really deserved that black eye, but he hadn't managed to talk Astrid out of giving it to him on principle. And Snotlout seemed almost expectant of it; like some badge of honour to show off. Eh, Vikings. He may be one of them, but he still didn't understand half of it.

So he was here, whistling with Gobber - in fact, they were doing duet whistling, and it was so weirdly awesome because they were both in tune. He loved putting his new apron on, rolling up his sleeves and getting his hands covered in soot while the metal blazed and bent to his will. Even if it was just the last of the yak shods, or fittings for new armour for Dogsbreath - the boy had been estranged long enough, honestly, and he needed to speak with him again. Still, it was a bit sad that he hadn't apologised yet - then again, Dogbreath had always been taciturn and had problems saying what he thought in a manner that wasn't blunt. Hiccup sighed mid-whistle, and then caught up the tune again; he'd go talk to him. What he'd done had made him angry, and put him in the middle of a manure heap. But he had also seemed unable to understand why they'd been all so angry at him, from what Thug had said. Maybe he just needed more friends, not less.

Eh, he'd think about it later. The work he was doing now had a little bit of finagling involved, and he really, really wanted to get this right. He'd noticed (with his tongue - the thought still made him blush) that Astrid's ears were pierced now. They'd never been before - another something to add to the ever growing bank of new details he was hoarding about Astrid. And of course, if her ears were pierced, he totally had to get her something for them. Sure, he'd given her jewellery he'd brought back with him, but that necklace of hers needed a mate. Or two.

She only took it off to bathe, and polished it every wash day; something else he'd learned. And something even more mind boggling had been that she thought he hadn't liked her. Of all the stupid things!

"Well, you fell over to look away!"

"Because you were naked!"

"Exactly!"

"Opposite reason! Totally opposite!"

He snickered to himself, delicately working the pincers to bend the warm silver into the design he wanted. She'd thought he didn't like her; Frigga have mercy of her sweet, misguided head. A man did his best to preserve her dignity and she went and got worried. The half-hour in the bathing room helping her to get the mud off had been

the best and the worst of his miserable life. He'd had to wash her, gloriously naked and beautiful, because her hands were bound in bandages, and she had no mercy on him and hadn't let him only wash her back - of course she'd had mud on her chest, too. Not that he'd seen any, she didn't. Not that he'd looked. . . . who was he kidding?

"So you â€| "_

"_Astrid, I had no idea how it would be received if I, er, showed interest. Ack, you women are so lucky! You can look without getting a knot in your trousers that gives you away!"_

"So you were always so stiff and uncomfortableâ€| "_

"_Yes, thank you; truer words were never spoken. Oh, yeah, laugh it upâ€| ack! I dropped it, where - dear gods in Asgard sorry. Sorry - Asgard, there's the ragâ€|._

He quickly wiped the smile off his face. It was undignified. But by the gods her breast was soft. And she'd gasped and laughed instead of killing him.

"So yeah, for the sake of making the obvious more obvious, yes, you're beautiful and you drive me mad. Not that we hadn't found that out in the shed when I was at your mercy."_

"_Wellâ€| the feeling's very mutual. Not that we didn't find that out in the shed too. Umâ€| do you think you can do my hair now? That shoulder's really clean, I promise. Ah, please Hiccup? My head really itches."_

A pleading look over a pink, wet shoulder and he was totally lost. It took all of him just not to climb in the bath and do all sorts of unspeak- â€| Fantastic way of calming himself down, this. He had to try it more often.

Some chief he was going to make if someone found that weakness of his out. He was utterly doomed. And his brain was about as fogged up with the image of her in that bath and the feel of her soft skin as that bathing room had been.

Argh, he couldn't let himself get distracted. He still had to fix that bent shoulder pad of hers - and she wouldn't tell him how it got that way save 'venting steam', which usually meant she'd gone killing trees. Maybe she'd been imagining that shoulder guard was his head. Maybe that's why he was stalling to fix it - he couldn't help wincing every time he looked at it as an imaginary bruise throbbed on his skull. And oh heck, Gobber was giving him knowing looks, and it was beginning to get annoying, especially because he knew he was guilty as charged and couldn't stop the damn cheeks from going red.

Not that any distractions he tried worked for long, because . . . it was not like he hadn't enjoyed washing her hair â€| or that she hadn't enjoyed it, if the constant happy humming and head thrown back were any indication. Which did not help in the- _

"Hiccup! "

"GYA!"

The younger smith looked down at the tiny piece of silver in his pincers, which now sported a very interesting shape totally not what he needed it to look like. His dad came up behind him - and Gobber was mercifully quiet, though the darn eyebrows were giving him a stealth-wiggle - one of these days, he was going to get back at Gobber, he swore it. Find him a woman then catching him in a compromising position and tell all the Hall.

Well, no. He'd probably preen and throw a few hammer-headed yaks in there to make things 'spicy'. Erk.

"Hi, Dad. I see you've been practicing your indoor voice" he said in a tone that conveyed his annoyance, and at least his father had the decency to look sheepish as he glanced at the ruined piece of silver. Then he grinned to match Gobber when he caught sight of what was on the bench. Two of Toothless' smaller scales, roughly of the same size, and then the two silver webs slowly being built around them, and two silver hooks waiting on the side. Hiccup rolled his eyes as he blushed again.

"Ah, hard at work, eh?" his dad said in that teasing tone that never failed to make him feel flustered and stupid.

"I, um," he squared his shoulders. "Yes. I have plans. For after the Thing." He folded his arms and rested against the bench in an attempt to appear casual. "So; needed anything? Sword sharpened? Axe ground? Head put in the clincher?"

"Huh?"

"Nothingâ€|"

"Well, son," his dad gave him a look, which meant he'd rewound the words in his head and heard them clearly only now. He'd probably get cuffed for that later, but he couldn't help it. He'd missed teasing his dad. It was always fun, and now that their relationship was repairing and that the utter, foundational conviction that he was loved had returned to it's proper, solid place, it had stopped giving him flutterings of trepidation every time he opened his mouth and something snarky came out. "If you have to be like that about it, maybe I won't tell you."

And that was another thing that was new; his dad teasing back. It was such a breath of fresh air. Although this air grated on his sense of curiosity.

"Eh, you interrupted me already," he said, gesturing with the silver piece still in pincer.

"Hum," Stoick replied; his dad was grinning under that beard, Hiccup knew him well enough to realise that his eyes were doing the pinchy thing. Uh-ohâ€|" "I would like you to do me a favour, son. There is someone I want you to talk to, and make up with."

"Erâ€|" Hiccup waved the silver more questioningly this time.

"No, no. I know you and Astrid made up..." Oh no, the wiggle brows. What did he know? Who'd told him? Surely not Astrid. Asgard, had he

seen anything? His dad had never been there when they'd â€| in the hall. He'd never been there, right? Erk. "I want you to speak to Dogsbreath."

Ah. Hiccup deflated at once, head beginning to clear and fall into more serious patterns of thought. "Yeah, I was sort of planning to, anyway." He tilted his head at his father. "Wolftooth asking for a favour?"

"Not blatantly," his dad replied, and Hiccup snorted. Trust Wolftooth to be persnickety and subtle about it. "But the boy has some very important things to tell you, too."

Looking at his dad in askance, he noticed the tense set of his shoulders, despite the levity of the conversation, and the way his eyes looked through the windows as he stooped to fit into the smaller part of the shop, head bowed and trying to stay as close to Hiccup as possible.

Ah. Apparently there was something Thing-related going on here.

"I'll look for him later today, then. Maybe he can give me a hand with Farthog in the arena. Footsore said his wife would probably like a gentler dragonâ€|" He looked at Gobber, who was whistling studiously, and his dad nodded. Well, at least Gobber was in on whatever it was, too. "And then I may invite him to the hall for some mead with us tonight."

"Excellent idea! I'll warn Astrid."

Yes, best warn Astrid. Before she got any idea into her head that involved her being in the tub, all pink and wet and - argh.

"Y-you do that," he replied, turning back to this work-bench to avoid seeing the reaction to the dreaded stutter. Bah! He was as bad as he used to be at fourteen!

His dad parted with one of his quietest laughs - which meant that the weapons on the wall rattled only slightly, and slapped his back, which now at least Hiccup could brace for. The line of the bench was going to make a nice bruise against his lower belly, though.

Wrangling his thoughts away from Astrid - ok, wrangling part of his thoughts away from Astrid - he went back to trying to work on the cooling silver, fingers doing their own thing as his brain churned.

Something important. Something important to tell Hiccup, but that his father obviously knew already. Possibly an apology, but also something else. Something important, if his dad's shifty attitude said anything. And Gobber knew, but Gobber was his dad's closest friend, so perhaps â€|

Speculation was useless. With a sigh, he took the work-in-progress and put it on the bench in his old, tiny work-room, saluting Gobber on the way out who gave him a nod and continued whistling and hammering as if nothing had happened.

Toothless was right outside, belly-up in a spot of sun.

"Hey bud," he said gently, and Toothless opened his eyes and turned his head to look at him eagerly. "Up for a short flight and some sniffing? I need to find Farthog and Dogsbreath."

Toothless gave him the smile he'd been named for, righted himself with a shake, and was off like a shot into the clear blue sky of that day as soon as Hiccup mounted. He had a friend to make up with, and, apparently, something important to find out.

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He waited quietly in the dark, hoping for a squeak or a sound that would alert him of the arrival of his quarry. His grin was wide and evil as he crouched in his hiding spot under the table.

There is finally a rusting, and then a creaking as the old door opens on noisy hinges. He couldn't help the grin that spread on his face as his favourite victim walked in.

With a war cry, he leapt up, hatchet in hand, and within a moment was upon her. The next moment, he was flat on his belly, utterly winded from both the blow and the fall, arm twisted and face smooshed to the floor.

"Ow, I'm hurt," he muttered around his squashed cheeks and lips. "You totally win again."

"Of course I do, Tuffpuffin," she whispered in his ear, and then his hurting shoulder and belly and the dirt in his mouth was totally worth it. She scrambled off after a final endearing hair-tug, and he got up, sitting cross legged in the dust.

"You got away alright?" he asked her, looking at the door, only slightly ajar to let the light in. There was very little light in the room, and he could barely see a chair sitting under the hole in the ceiling, a table and a single, rickety closet, beside the stone fireplace which was the only thing that had survived the mildew. All in all, it was a perfect little creepy place to pull pranks in.

"I did. You?"

"The sister's covering for me. Astrid told me to get here."

"Hiccup." Cami's grin gleamed in the sparse light. "He also said he may have a solution."

"What, really?" Tuffnut grinned back at her, scooting closer. She sat crosslegged across from him, their knees touching, and leaned in.

"Yup. Possibly a permanent one, knowing him. But he said we've got to be careful, because we have to make sure to have our arses covered before we spring anything." She rolled her eyes. "If it were up to me, I'd have my dragon mow your hall down and call it a day."

"Ung, I know, don't remind me. It's a real temptation to just have Flat-Fart blow it up." Tuffnut growled when he remembered his horrid,

stupid grandfather, may Hel take him and fart in his mouth, and the stupid blubbering mother he hadn't forgiven yet. She should have believed him, not some barmaid. "There is no way that stupid woman got past my trouser knots. Not when you can't."

"I know," Cami hissed. "That was our little game. You do the knots, I undo them, and then we get to play with what's inside."

Man, was it getting hot in there or was it just him? He loved it when she growled like that. Ok, ok; he loved it. He just needed never to let his sister find out.

"And then she knotted them right up again? As they were?" Tuffnut said incredulously with indignation, folding his arms. "Pu-lease. Ruffnut can't!"

"And Ruff's about as good as you on the knotting." Tuffnut preened. Screw it all, this girl liked him, and liked his sister. There was no going back. He gave her his best grin, and she punched him in the gut. His grin just got wider.

"Why are you â€¢!" she started, then, her hands turning from a punch to a caress as her fingers danced along the fur of his vest. "Last time you said you can't even be seen with me in the Hall anymore, to have a meal. Even if the others are all on the table with us." Tuffnut could have broken his nose on a rock right then, because Cami looked really sad. Not spitting mad, or glaring, or concocting a plan. Just plain sad. And he really wanted to break something.

"Yeah. Remember that barmaid who interrupted us the first night, when we were trying to drink Thuggory under the table?" he drawled.

Cami's eyes caught fire. He could see them scrunch up into a furious, hateful beam of deathy-doom even in the near darkness. "Is that her? Is it her? If I murder her in her sleep and then throw the body to sea, the arrangement's off, isn't it?"

Tuffnut shuddered. Loki, he loved this girl. May she and all her deviousness be preserved. And kept safe.

"That's my cousin," Tuff replied despondently. "She lives in my hall. Tells that smelly old man everything I do while I'm in the Great Hall."

"So we won't eat there anymore," Cami hissed. "We eat somewhere else. You can come to my hall. My women won't rat on us."

"Yeah, because me being seen coming in and out won't be suspicious at all," he huffed - he'd already thought of it, and Hiccup had shot the idea down. Fishlegs was now in on it, somehow, and Ruffnut was overjoyed about it, cackling that she could now plot their grandfather's death in the safety of her hall.

"And Fish and Ruff's?"

"They've got something on her. Fishlegs was really, really, really angry when Ruff told him. Don't know what he plans to do, but it's

going to be awesome. Remember what I told you about Snotlout?"

"Oh, yeah!"

"Yeah, well, I think that's going to pale in comparison to this. He actually crushed the pipe in his hand and left for his own hall, or so his father said. Mr Ingermann looked a little worried, and that means he was very worried. I really hope they issue a blood feud and Fishlegs gets to kill my stupid grandfather in combat. He'd crush him. Like the pipe!"

"That will be something to see!" Cami replied, and her fingers were still tugging at the fur on his vest, sometimes giving his loose hair a pull when it fluttered around her fingers. "Listen, why are you you changed your mind." She frowned up at him. "First time I cornered you about this-

"And punched me in the face," he recalled fondly.

"And kicked you in the knads," she snickered, and he winced, but cackled with her. Gods, this woman. "But not too hard. I need those later." Aw yes. "Anyway, you were all for just breaking off with the clan and going solo. Hiccup had said he'd support us, soâ€!"

"They took your letters," he replied glumly. "I had them hidden, but that nosy stupid woman found them. And now my grandfather has them." He scowled down at his feet, folding his arms tighter and feeling like an utter cock. He wasn't sure he'd ever forgive his mother for that. "If I don't do what they say, they'll show them to people. And then you'll be stuck. If I shut up and just you changed your mind." He shrugged. "Maybe I can divorce the cunt in a few years. Or you'll find someone else."

"I want my chicken destroyer," she argued querulously, and he didn't admit that he was so very, very relieved and happy and elated, at least until he realised what she said.

"Och, no no no! How'd you find that out! You weren't supposed to find that out!" He hid his face in his helmet, but his words echoed more instead of being muffled. "I'm going to die in shame!"

"Shut up," she replied with a laugh, slapping the helmet and knocking him over. He probably had line marks in a circle all around his face now, if the throbbing was any indication. She sighed dreamily. "It's awesome. All those chickens, all of them clacking and squaking, and then suddenly blowing up. Sweet baby Loki that must have been epic. And I missed it!"

Tuffnut couldn't have been more in love. Like, if someone emptied his insides and filled him with it, it would still be less than what he felt now. It didn't make sense, but he'd never been a fan of sense anyway.

"We could do it again," he offered, feeling like he was in a hazy place where everything was awesome and incredible. "Stoick would kill us so, so, so hard that Hel wouldn't be able to torture us, because we'd be deader than her, but it would be so worth it."

"Oh yes, especially if the explodey chickens were the ones of your

clan!"

"Oh yeaah!"

Aaaaand she was kissing him. And groping him. Aw yeah. And she had absolutely no problem with him groping her back. Now this was a wife worth having. And damnit all he'd tied those knots too well, why wouldn't they come off-

A groan and a tumble stopped them short. They'd rolled under the table, somehow, and Cami still had her hand down his pants - which meant that they were cutting into his back something fierce. Neither one of them dared move; if they were caught here, it would be incredible, massive, godawful trouble for the both of them. But especially for her, and that was unacceptable.

He gathered her up quickly (taking that hand out, unfortunately), and spotting a pile of rags, grabbed a few of them and covered as much of them as possible. The door to the shed opened a moment after, and a pair of unfamiliar legs were followed by two others.

"Check the closet," a voice growled, and the old rickety furniture made horrible protesting noises as the doors were flung open, and then one of them fell to the floor. Cami held him tighter, and he was sure it was because she thought he was scared, but he swore he'd spear these assholes and let her get away.

"Right. Get a light."

A candle was lit, and a stub was thrown to the ground next to them as a moment later the noise of a ceramic plate hit the table on top of them,

"Are you sure about this?" Tuffnut felt Cami stiffen considerably in her arms, and her face was suddenly murderous.

"Aye. Just got the bird back; there was a storm with that East wind, and the whole thing got delayed. They won't be here on time."

"Damn it all!"

"I know. We leave four days before Snoggletog, so that's not far off. They may as well turn back."

"Unless we find a way to prolong the talks."

"But how do we do that?" the first voice grumbled again. Cami's face was contorting into odd shapes. "I think that Wolftooth's had more than enough of us."

"We could always go with your first plan," said the other voice. "Say the dragon bastard took your daughter's innocence and sit back to watch the fireworks."

"Not gonna work," he growled. "Girl's still a bloody virgin. I couldn't get the guard to go in there and do his duty. Killed him, but all the others in the room quit. Can't find a bloody real Viking to pay his weight in gold."

"Eh, have someone do it now," the other man said. Tuffnut was getting

bile rising in his throat. This guy was talking about having someone do that to his daughter? He risked a look at Cami, and instantly clamped his arms around her harder. She was the colour of an angry monstrous nightmare. Which was the colour of 'screamy deathy burny lots'.

"No good. That goddamn Dogsbreath is with her all the time. And if it's not, it's one of the goddamn women. I even saw her with the stupid dragon brat's promised." He spat on the ground, close to where their feet were. Tuffnut clamped a hand on Cami's mouth when he saw her open it, her fingers caressing the daggers he had in his belt.

"We'll have to think of something else, then."

"Hmm, tomorrow; There went the midday meal horn. If all three of us don't appear..."

"Yeah â€| may Berk rot in Hel's realm. It's raining again. This rock forsaken by the gods seem to be able to do little elseâ€|"

"I heard it actually hailsâ€|"

It was a moment before they moved. Cami had begun cussing a blue-streak behind his hand, and the old rags were so itchy he couldn't appreciate the layer of grit on them.

"-alf troll son of a diseased yak filled with rotting milk and poxed udders!" Cami hissed as he let her mouth go to take the rags off them.

"Did you hear what I heard?" he hissed back, his brain still stuck on what they'd proposed to do that girl he didn't even know. But he thought of someone doing that to his sister and â€| well, she would bash their head in and then bathe in their entrails. Or to Ca- eh, stupid. She'd wear their ribcage as a corset.

But still! It was - hey, wasn't it sort of what they were doing to him? Making him marry that horrid woman because she said so, and tying him down to a life where he had to have sex with her, which felt sort of rape-y â€| aw, great, so he was the hapless lass in this analogy? Fantastic.

"I really don't want to get raped," he grumbled to himself.

"What?" Cami asked. She blinked at him and looked at him consideringly.

"Ack, I meant, that poor girl, you know. It'd be probably what she'd be thinking."

Cami went purple as Stoick's Nightmare again. "That was so totally unacceptable that I'm going to tell my mother about it. Right the fuck now. It's against treaty rules, and against Bog laws, and just plain wrong on so many levels that I want to cut their man bits off and make them watch while I feed them to the pigs."

Tuffnut instinctively cupped his nether regions.

"And you are going to get fondled by no one else but me. Got me?"

she hissed, her foul mood obviously transferring to their situation. He gulped, but shrugged.

"No problem here. You know, as long as it's mutual." She hit him on the head, knocking his helmet off. "Of course it's mutual. Stupid question."

She snorted, and he was proud to see her half-smirk come back. They moved cautiously towards the door, then crept out when they saw that the coast was clear.

"I'm going to my ma. Come with me - ah, but first, we need to go get my da'."

"Your 'da'?" Tuffnut asked, following behind her and trying not to get distracted by her tangled hair waving this way and that.

"Yeah, my dad," she replied. At his incredulous noise, she sniggered. "What, Bog women need men to make babies, too. S'why I need to break through those knots in your trousers after all."

"Eh," he said with a shrug, climbing over a knotted root. "He's here on Berk?"

"Da's here all the time. He's a Berk man like you, Tuffpuffin."

"What?" Tuffnut paused mid-stride. "Do I know him?"

"Sure you do," Cami paused to look back at him. "I could'a sworn I told you you know the big crazy guy at the forge who taught Hiccup, right?"

"You mean Gobber?" Tuffnut choked out. Oh that was awesome! He got to get freebees at the forge if all went well, and -

Wait. No, Gobber was the girl's dad. Girl's dads were scary on the best of days and you

Oh. If everything went well, he'd get Gobber as a father-in-law. Gobber, with the perchance for sharp, sharp things, and the hook at the end of one arm he liked to cut other things with. Preferably men who went after his daughter.

"I'm going to be hurt," he muttered to himself as Cami kept sniggering and began to move forward again. Tuffnut stared at the tree in front of him. "I'm going to be very, very hurt," he told it.

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And the thing about secrets is that there is no way of keeping them that way. That is, unless the author decides it so. Reconciliations between Dogsbreath and the other heirs will happen strictly off-screen because after all, reconciliation is a process.

The politics don't only affect the big picture.

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><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

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><p>Chapter 15 - Due bounds_

**Whatever has overstepped its due bounds is always in a state of instability.**

â€• _**Seneca**_

Ruffnut sat by the fire in her hall, knitting a vest she wasn't sure was too big or too tiny. Mama Ingemann had been trying to teach her, and Ruffnut had been surprised when she caught the finger movements up surprisingly quickly with the result that she could produce swathes and swathes of knitted wool. It was the counting that beat her completely. Luckily, Mama Ingemann was patient, and they'd agreed that Ruff could just knit, and then Fishlegs' mother would do the other stuff with it. It gave her an odd satisfaction to know that all the littles in the Ingemann household were dressed in wool _she_ had knitted together. Even her brother had helped, somehow showing he had a knack for something other than disaster and a good eye for yarn and fabric quality and colour.

Her brother wasn't here right now though; if he knew what was good for him, he would be in the woods with Cami. As happy-go-lucky as she was, that girl had been cut up right and proper about the affair with her stupid twin. Loki, Ruff thought she would be saddled with him for life, and that no woman would ever want him no matter how much their parents tried to sell him off. And now there he was, hot-stuff.

Hot-stuff who'd gotten her into trouble. She pouted, rocking the wooden cradle with her foot and glaring down at her ever-faster fingers, what was supposed to be the front of the woolen vest growing surely longer than it was supposed to. It didn't really matter - Mama Ingemann always found something to do with her offerings, and the inside of both their halls had never looked so warm and pretty. But the clicking and clacking wasn't relieving her stress as she'd hoped. Not when she was waiting for a verdict.

Finally, just as she was about to rise and put another log into the fire, the front door opened. Ruffnut froze, feeling oddly vulnerable as she looked at her husband standing there for a moment before he shuddered and shut the door behind him. He didn't say a word as he walked in, which didn't bode well, but Ruffnut went ahead and threw the log into the flames anyway.

"So, what's the chop?" she asked, trying for her usual nonchalance and failing miserably. She wasn't sure what to do; should she be extra nice? Or would that make it seem like she thought she was wrong? She hadn't had much choice! So should she just pretend to be ok, or would that make him mad?

She hated when she had a problem she couldn't punch in the face. Granted, her grandfather was a good candidate, but he wasn't on hand right now, and that was annoying. So she just stood there and looked at Fishlegs, rocking her cradle with one hand absently.

He sat down on the bench by the fire, right next to where she had been knitting her heart out. He ladled some of the whey soup into a tankard and started blowing and sipping, opening his mouth several times and saying nothing, and making Ruff more and more anxious until she began wondering whether punching the husband would get him unclogged and her de-stressed.

It usually worked. But she wasn't sure in this case.

He gave her a couple of looks as he sipped before he sighed. "I'm not mad at you," he said. Ruffnut felt relief at once. Then she straightened up again. She didn't know whether she should be relieved! Or offended! "Well, I am, but â€‘ well, I'm not sure."

She blinked at her husband. Then she slumped forward, looking down at the sleeping Woodnut and rocking the cot more gently when she realised she'd increased the pace in her agitation. "Good, because I'm not sure whether I should feel worried, spitting mad, or so very, very sorry and grovelling and promising so much sex you won't be able to walk."

Fishlegs choked on his soup; good, at least some things didn't change. He gave her a look and she pretended to look chastised.

"Well," he went on with a wobbly voice, coughing a little more. Then he put his tankard on his lap and shrugged, opening his other arm, and Ruffnut finally felt alright again as she sat down beside him and snuggled up to his woolen clothes - her work, again. Ha. "I'm mad at you. But I'm madder at your clan. And I realise that they put you in such a bad position that you didn't know what to do."

"Yeah. They threatened Woodnut. I'm not even sure they could, but they did and how could I risk that?" she replied, feeling sad and angry and confused.

"Oh, they couldn't," he replied, and Ruffnut found herself smiling at the imminent destruction about to take place. That was the voice he'd used just before he'd strung Snotlout out to dry.

"No?" Ruffnut said, bloodlust beginning to boil.

"No. Talked it over with my mum and dad." Ruffnut flinched. "Oh, don't worry. They're more worried about you than angry. And I think I'm more mad you didn't talk to me, but â€‘ if they told you they'd do it if you told me tooâ€‘! Mama made me see that she would have done the same if any one of us would have been threatened too. She said it's a mother thing." Aw, that was nice. She was going to have to let Mama Ingermann take Woodnut for a week now. She'd come back eating while sitting up correctly, and Ruffnut would have to take ages to break her out of it, but it was the least she could do. "Which is why I'm more mad at your clan. And I'm going to make sure they don't mess with the Ingermann again."

"Are we issuing a blood-feud?" Ruffnut asked excitedly. Sure, she

knew they weren't (and she had no problem at all re-aligning herself as an Ingemann now) but the thoughts were sweet, sweet bloodshed.

"No. We actually thought about it." What_?! Oh, she knew the Ingemann were more awesome than they looked. "But that would include your brother. Which is stupid." Oh, right. She hadn't thought of that. It's why she let her husband do the thinking anyway.

"So no blood feud. But what?" They could duel. Mr Ingemann was so, so strong, he could lift three threes with roots still in and not break a sweat. And her g'pa would be dared by name, and then he couldn't throw the task to someone else because of his age - probably her brother. He'd probably make Tuff do it just because he was a bastard and would find it funny - and he couldn't escape.

Or Fishlegs could do it. Oh yes, he could. Her husband has this face when he was angry (at anyone but her) that was so darn hot.

"Oh, we're doing a little bit of talking between us first. It so happens that Hiccup had asked me to look for â€œ well, you know about that. It's why we talked. Anyway, what I found is going to be very useful." Fishlegs gave her a look she'd never seen before. It was utterly devious and he actually cackled. She was so in love. "You know how they're obsessed with honour. We'll just kick them in the balls. Figuratively at least."

Ruffnut looked at him for a few more moments as he kept giving her that smile and sipping his soup like nothing had happened. Her husband had cackled and blasphemed and he pretending nothing had happened. It needed to be rectified.

"If you repeat this anywhere, first I'll kill whoever you told, deny it, then find you and cull your balls," she hissed. His face instantly went into 'yes ma'am!' mode. Good, the training was working. "But I love you. A lot. Like, if you squeeze me right now it's the only thing that would leak out." She took his mug, put it on the bench and stood, dragging him behind her by the arm. "Now come to the bedroom and give me more babies."

When he answered with an 'eep', her grin became obscene.

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He had to admit, it was a great satisfaction. It wasn't every day that he could make Hiccup hammer his own thumb and then look like that. Slack-jawed suited him.

Gobber gave an evil chuckle, which Cami mirrored. Hiccup ran a hand down his face and blinked at them.

"Yeah, I can really see it now. In fact, I don't see how I could have missed it before. Wow. So Gobber's your dad. And you never told me? Even when I told you I'd become his apprentice?"

Cami shrugged. "There wasn't enough time. I wanted to make a whole production of it." She pointed at his face, "because I wanted to make that happen. But then your dad stopped bringing you, and the Thing hasn't happened on Berk in almost ten years."

"Oh aye," Gobber said, putting his repaired mace down and resting against the bench, arms folded in reminiscence. "We just couldn'ea do it here, not knowing when a raid would hit. The beasties had us busy enough without you folk come mucking around."

"And that means I didn't get to see you for almost three years! You ne'er sailed by Bog's outer islands the way you used to!" Cami pouted. Gobber gave her a light cuff on the head, and she took it with a sheepish look. "Now look'e here, lass. Who's the one with the flying beastie who didn't come see her old pa, eh?"

"What was I s'posed to do, fly in and say hi? Berk'd have lynched me."

Gobber stopped to think about it.

"Eh, you have a point."

"And Hiccup was counting on us keeping you scardy willies in the dark so he could keep pretending to be shady and mysterious."

"Hey!"

"Eh, that too."

"And ma told me she she gave you all my little gifts." Cami looked at him eagerly, and he gave her a fond pat on the head.

"Aye, keep them in me drawer at home, right beside the spare peg-leg." Cami beamed at him, leaning in to rest on his shoulder. Hiccup was giving them a half-dazed, half-disbelieving smile, and he went back to finagling away at something on his opposite bench, giving them some privacy with his back turned. "But that doesn't mean that you get to fool yer old 'da and not come visit now. And how's that worm of yours doing?"

Gobber got a bump at his elbow, and he snickered when an irate snort gave the dragon away. He pat it on the head, and Sting gave a start and rippled into vision.

"Rule number one in stealth, lassie," he told the blinking dragon. "Never give your position away, even when you're provoked. Odds are, they're doing it to see if you're there," he finished off with a flourish of his hook. Cami gave a chuckle and took her dragon's face in her hand, putting it in her lap where Sting gave a pouty gargle and submitted to be petted.

"She's learning, da''," she snickered. "Hiccup said she was only three years old when I found her. Wandered off from her nest, most like. Curious little brat." Sting gave a whine, and Gobber patted her flank, making her wiggle. The dragon gave a baleful look for tickling her, but then curled a tail around him.

"There's a good lass. You'll protect my devious little bairn, yes?" he told Sting. Cami snorted again, but Sting preened at being given such an evidently important a task. Then he turned a stern look to his girl. "And I'll do the protecting where it comes to the lads. So now, spill it."

Cami went stiff, colour rising up her neck. She glared at him furiously, but he just folded his arms and looked at her silently and expectantly, just as he had every time he'd ever wanted to get something across to her. He'd had, perhaps, a more active role than most fathers of Bog Heirs, with Bertha being quite taken with him that she found excuse to come to Berk in those early years often enough for his bairn to actually know his name and his authority. And just as much as she had when she was a wee lass with nothing more than skin on her bones and bush of flighty hair and flightier ideas underneath, she gave him a pout, folded her arms, haunched her shoulders and submitted.

"Da', look, it's being sorted." Or almost submitted. Because she was a good lass and her mother's bairn too. "Ask Hiccup."

"I'm staying out of this one, 'lassie', " Hiccup piped up from the other side of the shop, still working on whatever it was he was doing to try to get laid with Astrid. Or maybe try not to get laid. He hadn't quite understood what he was trying to do between the blushing and the spluttering when he'd asked.

"I'll feed you to a troll, one of these days," she growled at him, Sting mimicking her, but only playfully as Toothless's head came up through the window and chuffed at her. Sting whined, and submitted right away. "Oi, tell your big bad dragon to stop bullying mine."

"I've already told you, Cami," Hiccup replied patiently, still bent over his bench. "After Toothless took down the Red Death, all the other dragons started seeing him as some sort of Alpha. Not that the big lazy arse deserves it." He got a look, and Toothless accurately blasted Hiccup's hammer out of his hand on the downswipe. Gobber ducked, taking his lass with him as it sailed by their heads, and Hiccup looked up to give Toothless a look pretty much the equivalent of the one the dragon had given earlier. There was a dragon-ish giggle, chuckle or cackle - Gobber wasn't sure which - and then Sting was chirping at Toothless, flaring her long fleshy horns, and Toothless preened.

"I think she's saying 'good shot', " Cami chuckled. When her dragon shook Cami's arms off and went outside to sit next to Toothless and preen him, they all blinked.

"I think she just offered to have his babies," Gobber said with a snicker, expecting the horrified look from both his bairns. Hiccup, the elder of the two, gave up first and shrugged. "Don't think it would work, but she's trying, poor lass. Now, don't think you've skived the question." He threw an arm around Cami, who had hopped up to sit on one of the window benches to be at eye-level with her old da'. She pouted at him, and Hiccup promptly pretended to go out and have an argument with his dragon about work safety and firing hammers at people's heads.

"Really, da', Hiccup's helping me sort it." She was giving him a hopeful pout. No doubt, the hope was that he'd drop it. Fat chance.

"Like a good brother would," Gobber said. She gave him a horrified look and he snickered. "I brought up that boy equal measures I

brought up you, lass. But that doesn't mean this old man will give up his right to take care of his little lass. Now spill it. Who do I have to skin?"

"It's not his fault," Cami growled. "I was coming to talk to you a while ago but he said you'd kill him if I did. And I said it wasn't true, but maybe he was right and you're an oaf."

Oh, poor heart. He was being replaced. His little girl never sided with anyone above her cool da' before, not when he was the one with the hook hand.

"Now look here, you give me the whole story, and I tell you whether or not I'll skin him."

"Or how about this; I tell you part of it, see how red you go, and then decide whether to tell you the rest," she replied defiantly. Gobber sighed, running a hand down his mustache and then nodded. Stubborn lass; all her mother.

"Ok, well, um." She sat up straighter, looking at him defiantly. "I chose him."

"Awright."

"And he has sense, so he chose me."

"Awright."

"But there are a few problems."

"What, he's married?" Gobber asked, jokingly. Cami flinched and a terribly cold passed over his skin. "Lass, if I find that you have been after another woman's man, and that you've gone and broke bairn's hearts by taking their da' away, so help me Thor, I'll put you across my knee."

"Da!" she said huffily, going red with anger. "There aren't any children, and she doesn't have any real claim on him! I had him first!"

"Ah, a love rival," Gobber said with a shrug. "Just thump her."

"I can't," she pouted. Gobber scratched his chin.

"She a general's daughter?"

"She's a barmaid."

"Then thump her with a thunkard. Will be added funnies."

"I can't because ma wants me to try not to start a war."

"Eh, barmaids get thumped all the time. An' how's he think about her, the lad? He's not fiddling be with both your hearts, right?" Gobber had a sudden thought and gave her a sharp look. "Is he 'fiddlin' at all, for all that matter?"

"Naw," Cami shrugged. "Not for lack of trying on my part," she went on with a pout.

"What? There's another lad this side of the archipelago apart from Hiccup who can keep it in his pants when a woman offers?" Gobber considered it. A flat-toned 'Thank you, Gobber, for that,' was heard from outside. And ignored. "I'd normally say he's an idiot, but I like 'im right now."

"Made a game out of it, actually," Cami said, and she was sad as she shrugged. Gobber rubbed her arm and she leaned into her old da'. "When I could get through the knots on his trousers we could get married."

Gobber blinked. Where had he heard that?

"Anyway, his family is against us, I think. Because I'd take the children. And because I'd keep the lasses and send the sons and not help raise them." She looked glum. "I'd help raise them. It's easier with the dragons now."

"Ah," Gobber said, beginning to understand. There had been incidents in the past that had occurred somewhat like this. Sometimes, the choice of a Bog Woman wasn't looked upon with the due respect it deserved; Bog Women always gave strong children. If the family got involved, it was all more complicated than a mace-to-the-head could fix. "So they're causing trouble, not the lad?"

"Caused it already," she sighed. "They promised him to another woman." Gobber felt himself go scarlet as his vision blurred red. That was a horrible insult! "Apparently she came forward with some claim or other, but I say they paid her to do it, or something like that, and they up and wrote the contract without even really looking to see if it's true. He hates her, and if I can't get through the knots on his trousers, she certainly can't!"

"Right enough," Gobber said mildly. "The lad's say in this?" He was trying to reserve judgement and stop himself from going to Stoick to ask permission to declare a blood feud, promise to Frigga that he was, but it was harder than chopping his own arm off.

"He wanted to cut himself off at first." Gobber's respect for the lad increased. At least he knew what his daughter was worth. "But then he started avoiding me, and I found out it was because they got my letters. To him, that is. And he said that he'll marry the other lass if they keep it from coming out andâ€œ!" she shrugged. Gobber didn't need her to elaborate. He knew what would happen to his little girl if those letters came out.

"Awright, I'll bite. I like this lad this far," he said. "Who is it now. You owe your da' a name if I'm to help you."

"You wouldn't know him," Cami hedged, looking away. Gobber puffed up.

"Don't you lie to me, daughter. You'd have told me the name in the first place if it was like that. So tell me. Now."

"Tuffnut."

Gobber gaped at her for a few moments.

"Tuff- _Tuffnut_? As in _Tuffnut Thorston_, that almighty scourge from Loki's loins who—" He paused and scratched his chin. "'Ang on, I actually think he's perfect for you. And that sister of his thought him the right way to treat a woman of your good breed." He pat her on the arm. "An' he's being good to you. With just enough brain about him to be afraid _of _ya as to be afraid _for _ya." He cackled, clanking his hook against his helmet. "Like this cloudy old head."

"Yeah," Cami replied, looking relieved and happy that he approved. His poor lass. She still loved her da' if she wanted his approval. "But it's all gone to dog now."

"Not quite yet, not quite yet. Didn't you say the lad was helping you?" Gobber replied, pointing out the window at Hiccup, who had stopped to talk to one of the generals from UglyThug.

"Yes, he's already found something." she shrugged, lowering her voice. "Pa, you can't tell anyone, ok? Not even ma."

"Listen here nowâ€|"

"Ma will have to take it up to the Thing. We're trying to keep it 'tween us so we can manage it without those letters coming out," she pleaded, and Odin was he a sucker for pretty eyes. There was no shame in it - if Thor could dress as a lass, he could be wound roun' the finger of one. Or two.

He sighed in resignation, and she hugged him around the middle. "Your ma is going to skin me, salt the pelt and make me wear it," he grumbled. "Can I tell 'er half of it? She already guessed it's on a lad you were mooning."

"Wasn't mooning," she muttered rebelliously into his shoulder.

"Sure you weren't, as much as Hiccup's never mooned on his own lass. Or Astrid didn't moon for him while he was gone, either."

"Oh, this I didn't know!" Cami crowed, eyes shining with potential mischief. He gave her a warning look.

"Don't go embarrassing the lass. Odin knows it took her the second forever to come t'terms with the fact she wanted a man at all."

"Oh, I know, I got her on that track myself," she answered proudly. When Gobber raised a brow she puffed her chest out. "What, did you think she got there on her own? I knew how Hiccup was on her - since he was eleven, for Frigga's sake - and when she came up with some nonsense in her head to try to stay off him because she didn't have the woman-parts to fess up to him, I set her straight. Seems to have gone down well."

"Eh," Gobber said with a grin forming. That was his lass. "How'd you do it? I was on the point of beating their heads together."

"I beat her head into the ground instead, 'n she did the rest," she shrugged. Gobber nodded.

"We're Vikings," he said. "A good knock to the head works better than

sappy words."

"Though the sappy words are good sometimes," she added, and Gobber was rather disturbed to see that look on her face. Then she punched him in the mug, and his pebble-tooth came out. "Don't look at me like that, you need the honey with the hatchet!"

He glared at her, feeling around his gum with his tongue and admonishing her in a slur. She snorted, producing a new river stone which he took up and stuck into his mouth after wiping it down on his front.

"Well, Hiccup seems to have gone off," he said, smacking his lips about to get used to the new tooth. "And left his work out - that lad, distracted as ever they came. Wouldn't touch those," he added, when his boggie lass ventured closer. "Those are for Astrid; for Snoggletog, I reckon, or sometime later. Not quite sure what 'e's planning to do, and can't quite decide whether he's trying to get into her leggings or stay out of them."

"Stay out, from what I know. Good man knows to respect a woman. Though I reckon she'd say she'd do with a little less respecting," his daughter snickered. Gobber shook his head.

"Just make sure that boy of yours keeps doing the respecting, and I won't have to gut him and make you a widow before you even resolve this problem, are we clear?"

Cami chuckled, but it was nervous, especially when she saw him begin to sharpen his hook. Her cheek twitched.

"No threatening to cut anything off before I use it, da'. 'S'not fair."

He gave her a stink eye. "Fair's relative, lass."

She swallowed. "I'll tell him to make the knots extra hard, shall I?"

"Aye. But so you know, I'll just cut through with the rest of him as I cleave him in two, knots or no knots. Wedding first."

Her eye twitched too.

"I swear I only love you because you're the coolest dad ever. Otherwise, I'd gut you."

He gave her a shining smile. "That's my girl."

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It was normal for the women of Berk to meet once every quarter moon at least so that the supra-domestic chores that everyone pitched a hand in - such as the chores at harvest time, the chores during the milling periods, during feasts, or during something like The Thing - could be equally distributed.

The Haddock hall, therefore, was full of women of all ages and all walks of life. Even some of the barmaids pitched in, although a few had been hand-picked to remain behind in the mead Hall at all times.

Brunhilda knew that the choice of who to leave behind this time had been very, very carefully made.

Brunhilda was so proud of her daughter. Who knew, after all those hard pregnancies, the missed children, the fevers taking some of them away before they got names, that when she had finally held that precious, precious girl-child in her arms nineteen years ago, looking up at her with misted blue eyes and screaming her lungs out, she would be looking at the next head woman of Berk?

And she was smart enough to know when to delegate, smart enough to know when to lead and when to ask for help.

The normal meeting to delegate laundry chores this time became something else. Not that this wasn't normal too - it was pretty standard for Berk. And it was rather exciting to have a few foreign lasses in with them as well. Sleet was here, Heather was sitting down and had Droplaug Ingermann fussing over her with some of her miraculous tea for settling stomachs. Her colour was already better.

The door opened and closed, and Cami pushed and pulled her way to the front. When Astrid saw she had arrived, she unsling Brisinga from her back and laid it out on the ground. Every woman in the room did the same with their primary weapon, so that a circle of shining metal laid around the fire, gold and red reflections flicking and dancing across all the polished surfaces. Goethi waved her staff over them in blessing, and then gave Astrid a serious, grave nod.

"I told you to bring your weapons," Astrid said without mincing words. "So you all know what this is about. I open the council of the Berk Women under my call. With our guests." Cami saluted, Heather waved and Sleet raised her eyes for a single moment. "My mother knows the traditions. She will lead part-way."

Astrid looked out at the room as if she'd been standing at the helm of her sex on Berk all her life. Brunhilda kept in a tear with all her Vikingly stubborn heart. Hiccup was getting more than he bargained for, settling on her little girl when he was eight years old. Well, suits him for taking her little warrior away from her.

"Some of you are new; some of us have been here since we became of age." She nodded towards Droplaug, towards SigrÃ-Ã°r - Sigga - Vingoss, married into the Jorgensen - and so many others; especially those who were not there. "For those who are new; these meetings are sacred to us all. Anyone who offends these meetings offends the gods, and offends us all. Anything that is said within these walls remains within them; we must all swear to't." Goethi shook her staff again, and the room fell even quieter. "All must repeat; We swear never to breathe word of this meeting or its content to neither the menfolk nor the ones not present, may lightning strike me and all my sheep get poxy, ug ug."

The room repeated it in a chorus, the Ug Ug resounding around the hall. Brunhilda pursed her lips at Gerda Thorston's conspicuous absence, her slightly lagging final 'Ug' a long-standing running joke. Astrid had not invited her; it was her little girl's first political decision, and Brunhilda wasn't sure about it, but she didn't know enough to judge her, and could only support her as she

learned.

"What are we here for, then?" A young mother asked from the back of the room, her baby whining with fatigue.

"We need to discuss battle plans," Astrid said, and an instant hush fell on the room. "Berk is not safe. We need to guard our own. The men are probably talking on this elsewhere; we'll probably talk on it in the Hall when Stoick tells us. But I've found out through a friend." Astrid extended a hand towards Sleet, who jumped and went the colour of ripe plums as all the women in the room turned to look at her. She nodded at a few, almost tripped in her own dress, and went to stand next to Astrid. A few of the younger girls tittered, while some of the elder ones gave her fond nods.

"What's this threat then," Ruff asked, cradling Woodnut almost fiercely. Many grim faces mirrored her own; they were used to war. After facing giant reptiles trying to eat you, little could phase you in battle.

"We don't exactly know," Astrid replied, and Brunhilda knew at once that she was lying by the way she looked down at the flames instead of looking everyone in the eye. "Sleet told us and Dogsbreath what she knew, at great personal risk. I will need someone - anyone - with Sleet at all times. She's to be with a group of us all the time as we have been doing this last few days."

"So that's why we had that order?" Phlegma asked. Astrid nodded.

"She's not safe," Cami snarled. "We need to keep her safe if we're to tie her to us with twine. Women care for one another."

"Aye," the room answered, and Sleet went redder, looking down at her fiddling hands.

"Now, we need to distribute the rosters. Ruff." Ruffnut grabbed a number of sticks with differently coloured ends, put them in a keg, and everyone fished one. "Who were the usual heads of squad? Don't fish any. You can do that. Phlegma, I'm counting on you. Does everyone have one?"

Brunhilda passed the jar on, as she had kept her old role of flanking Val co-ordinating, and taken it over when her battle-sister had gone; she just added healer duties to it. Now she flanked her own daughter who had inherited the role. Life was so strange.

Once everyone had a coloured stick, Astrid continued.

"How many of us have young children or are gravid?" she asked. Ruffnut answered promptly.

"Including me, there are about sixty of us with nursing gas-monsters." There was a titter of laughter. "And then there are another ten weaned ones crawling around everywhere."

"How many of you are here?"

"All of us weaners. But only about three of the ones with the tiniest youngings." Ruffnut replied. "A lot of them are counting weeks still,

and the tots are without names."

"Ok," Astrid replied. "Droplaug; you are the one in charge of organisation a retreat, correct?" Droplaug nodded, still patting Heather's shoulder. "I want you to go to each and every one of them in the next days. Make sure they have all their necessities ready at a moment's notice. Who fished the orange sticks?" A number of women raised a hand. "You answer to Droplaug. I want you to divvy up the village mothers between you and see that everyone's well prepared."

A chorus of 'aye's answered. Cami cackled quietly.

"SigrÃ-Ã°r, you're in charge of the women who go up on dragons. Who has red ones? You will answer to SigrÃ-Ã°r - I want at least one woman for each of Stoick's teams. Those idiots don't know what's good for them."

"Oh, aye to that!" and a cheer rose up.

"The chief probably has the grain covered - SigrÃ-Ã°r, go over their plans with your husband. See if Spitelout and Stoick missed anything. Make sure there's enough whey saved together with the other grains. They always forget how important it is."

"Phlegma - you've got the hardest task. Who fished the white sticks? All of you are on the 'get them out of there' duty. When they get injured and won't quit, you swoop in, bonk them a good one on the head and get them to Goethi and my mother. It's a hard, thankless task. Those who don't feel up to it can change without shame. Try not to kill them, if at all possible." Brunhilda laughed with the others. "Those who fished the blue sticks? You're with me. We're the ground troops, we cover the others and we cover the men, and we mow down anyone who stands in our way as we do it. We protect Goethi and my mother, and take as many prisoners as we can."

All the woman answered with wolfish pride.

"Very well. I had you pick to make it fair, and to keep control of the numbers I needed. Now, anyone who feels better suited in battle for another role, see if anyone will exchange." There were a few swaps and a bit of jittery argument, but in the end all the women settled down with some satisfaction.

"This is wonderful," Heather said, her grin showing that Glunda's remedy had worked. "We have to do this on Freezing. It's fantastic."

"Oh, that it is," SigrÃ-Ã°r laughed. "The first rule is; never tell the menfolk."

"That's right," Droplaug laughed. "Then when crisis comes, we work like clockwork, and all the men think it's some sort of magic."

"Ha!" Said Dryleaf. "Like a beehive, they think, with all our minds alike. Go tell them!"

"And it's always so much fun to pretend we can talk with our minds. My husband's fairly convinced it's true because my daughters and I

have eyes, and we used them instead of looking at the clouds."

"And ears too, for that matter!"

"Very well," Astrid said, joining in the tittering as she picked up her axe. The room went quiet again as Astrid rested it on its hilt, now long enough to hold comfortably like that. "Those who picked the blank sticks are the auxiliaries. You will exchange the role with whoever is picked by Stoick for other tasks if they conflict with someone's assignment. Oh, and Phlegma," Astrid embedded her axe into her cooking table. "If Hiccup gets stubborn, call for me. No one gets to drag him away but me. Understood?"

"Not yet your husband, and already making you destroy furniture, oy," Sigga said with a snicker that Brunhilda shared. Her daughter shrugged, unperturbed.

"He might as well be," Astrid replied, causing the room to smile and look at each other knowingly.

"Oh aye, that may be true, but you're going to need a new table," Phlegma said with a laugh. Astrid looked at it with a frown.

"I suppose," she said. Her smile betrayed the fact that she was not too upset. "But I have more firewood."

"That's the spirit!"

"But oi, Stoick is going to think you're mad at someone in the house if you leave it there." Ruffnut got a truly evil sneer splitting her lips. "Leave it there! At least for a few days. Get them to go on tip toes around you for absolutely no reason."

"That's a great idea - makes up for the mess they make without fail."

"Just say you were chopping onions and it was taking too long."

"Or that you were swatting a fly. I love the face they make when we apparently make no sense to them. They look at us like we're dragons on a rampage."

Brunhilda gave a tiny snort, remembering the times when her husband had given her that look. Astrid shook her head at the lot of them and folded her arms.

"If there aren't any questions, we can move on to the actual distribution of tasks for the end of The Thing and Snoggletog." Astrid gave a smile around as the atmosphere in the room became warmer still at the mention of the much-beloved Winter holiday.

"Just one," Phlegma asked. Astrid nodded. "Am I right in assuming that the danger Sleet is exposed to is of the â€œ familial kind?" Astrid nodded. A hush settled onto the room, and poor Sleet looked down in shame. Cami growled; Brunhilda knew exactly why, and it made her feel ill. "Then if there is that power over her, where she can't refuse a direct summons, how are we to protect her from something like that?"

"You tell whoever is summoning her that I gave her a task, and if they have a problem with that, they can answer directly to me..." If that axe wasn't in the table already, it would probably be there right now anyway. "And then you send a terror my way with a note, so I'll know to be prepared to receive them."

"Aye," Phegma replied. The rest of the tasks were given out without problems - if one ignored Ruffnut's suggestion that they blow up a few, specific things (and people) as part of the celebrations. By the end, women were trickling out of Stoick's hall with tasks and thoughts, laughs and whispers on their lips. Sleet gave a meek nod and left, Cami glued to her side. Brunhilda moved beside her daughter on time to see her nod towards Sigga. Droplaug also joined their circle and Astrid drew her in.

"Tell Gerda to join you. Are you still ok with it?" Droplaug nodded with her usual benign smile, and helped Heather out. "Now I just hope Ruffnut disobeys as usual and is out on the battlefield that day. I don't want to know what she'd do if she found her mother there."

"Oh, the possibilities are endless," Sigga replied, eying the axe in the table. "The chop's probable. She's done her harm. She deserves it."

"Sigga," Brunhilda admonished mildly. Sigga had always been a hard woman, and had become more so after marrying Spitelout. Their son, at least, was doing slightly better under Hiccup's wing and leeching off the younger boy's kindness, but it was no surprise that he had turned into a glory-hog to try to earn a smile on his parents' face.

"Be that as it may, she's an experienced member of the tribe and I'm not letting that go to waste in a time of crises. Droplaug will need help. Gerda can provide it; she needs to get her head screwed on straight if she wants her daughter back, but that is outside this situation. That's the end of it."

Brunhilda could have burst with pride. Sigga gave her a half-lidded look after her daughter had walked out, dragging the table behind her. No doubt, it would be tinder in a few moments.

"I have to say, I can see why my boy was trying to hold out for her," she said with a shrug. Brunhilda felt her feathers ruffle on Hiccup's behalf - that boy was as much her son as any of the other rascals she'd pushed out screaming into the world, and not only because of her past close friendship with Val.

"Hiccup would have won her anyway," she declared with little room for argument. Sigga shrugged with little care.

"My boy's an idiot. They would have divorced after a few months. She's too strong for him, and he's too feeble for her. His dad's the same, but at least he knows when to yield to me and when I want him to use his own head. Snotlout's not got that sense yet." Then she snorted. "Hiccup's always had it. Remember when they used to play their games? She used to beat up anyone who used to try to get in on it. Then he used to give her a look and say a few words!"

"Aye," Brunhilda replied with a reedy, proud voice. "I'm not as worried, anymore."

Sigga laughed, arms akimbo and chest jiggling in open merriment that Brunhilda found herself sharing.

"I'm not at all! It's going to be a disaster. They're going to smash things. A lot. And once they're done smashing everything in sight, they're going to start building it up again."

"And it's going to be glorious," Brunhilda said, a devious smile on their face.

"Nobody tell the twins," Sigga hissed. "They'll think it's permission to blow up the buildings, too, and it's been months since we had to rebuild! A record!"

Both women left the hut laughing. Astrid outside was standing over what was left of her kitchen table, Hiccup, just returning from one of the concluding talks at the Hall, blinking down at the wooden debris and making bland observations about the alternate uses of kitchen utensils as Brisinga kept making short work of it while the banter flew free and playfully vitriolic.

Sigga gave her another knowing look. "And that's before they start having children."

Both youngsters blushed, and the two older women walked off laughing, arm-in-arm.

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The manoeuvrings have ended. Please, put on your seatbelt.

18. Part 3 - Flight - Forever

**Finally, things start happening at a pace I enjoy. Please fasten your seatbelts and know that the security exits are throwing yourself off the side of your dragon and hoping Hiccup wasn't joking about that flying suit. **

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Part 3 - Flight<p>

**Chapter 16 - Forever**

**Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.**

â€• _**Antoine de Saint-ExupÃ©ry**_

"I dun wanna go," Thuggory whined, already half drunk and swaying in his seat, speech slurred and interrupted by bouncing hiccups. Astrid

was openly chuckling, hiding her face in Hiccup's shoulder as Thuggory pouted into his keg and Heather looked at him in a mix between endeared and a-step-away-from-strangling.

"Only the ships are leaving for now," Heather sighed. "If I'm at all honest, I'm the one who should be pouting. I have to stay in a ship for two days, with your terrible aunt."

"I would usually offer you a bed in our hall, and mama can just say you need a few weeks of rest before we Hooligans take you back in one of our ships, butâ€!" Astrid shrugged one shoulder with a sad smile.

Hiccup looked down at her, her side glued to his and her arm snuck around his back under his fur cape. The ending feast swelled around them, yells and laughs and music, and she had not moved from his side, nor had he moved from hers.

If someone tried to coerce him onto the dance-floor tonight, Snotlout had the permission to punch them in the face. And between that damn blister that wouldn't go away, and the warm, sweet-smelling lady currently resting her cheek on his shoulder - not to mention a keg or two - it was really feeling like it should have, those weeks ago, at the opening feast.

They had one last meeting tomorrow, one last, tedious, ceremonial talk tomorrow morning. Wine would be drank and honey offered on bread and the new rules and regulations decided upon would be presented to all the chiefs written on parchment, be read out and signed. Then all the chiefs and heirs and generals would begin preparations to leave, some ships leaving as early as the midday hour tomorrow. Snoggletog was four days away, and once the last ally was off the island, Berk could finally breathe.

He looked down at the golden head resting against him as she laughed at a stark observation Dogsbreath made at Thuggory's expense, who was already too plastered to give a proper answer as his face talked into the wood of the table, words unintelligible. A part of him was looking forward to it. Quiet; sweet, blessed quiet, with calm mornings and timidly lit afternoons. Warm brews and hot soups and stews, gentle calloused hands and sweet smelling skin and hair. His pulse quickened just thinking about it. Freya, he hoped she'd help him be honourable towards her.

But he was also terrified. One word expressed wrongly, one â€ explanation not thought out well enough; that was all it could take. With the things he was going to tell her, it could be enough to undo everything, to leave him with emptiness and freezing cold. He remembered his Hall when his mother had first left her great void in it. Cold as a Winter night, and just as empty, with his father and he ghosting about its silent, creaky walls. He didn't want it to go back to that.

Would she break the contract? Worse, would she keep it, out of duty and obligation? Would she give him a chance to make amends?

He held her closer as his skin went cold beneath the warm clothing, and he kissed her crown. When her hand put her cider down and landed on his knee, rubbing soothing circles, it was a sweet pain. He didn't want to lose this warmth. Didn't want to stop becoming important to

her.

Aaand her hand was rising up his inner thigh. His keg went down with a light thunk as he took her fingers and laced them in his, ignoring the pout she shot up at him. If her hands had begun roaming, it meant at least one of them should stay sober. It paid to be on such good terms with her mother - it had felt like waaay too much information at the time, but he was blessing this 'new thing to know of Astrid' now; she was a grabby drunk.

"Spoilsport," she muttered into his shoulder, but her voice was gurgling with a restrained laugh, and he found himself smiling too.

"One of us has to keep us respectable, especially in public," he whispered back, trying to pretend nothing was happening when she took advantage of their position and kissed his neck. A flush ran up to his cheeks instantly as the admittedly enjoyable attention contrasting with the Hall-full of people and the table-full of close friends. That closet at one end of the Hall began to look inviting; but wouldn't it be too obvious, dragging- Ah, not going there. And with poor Sleet, just sitting right there and â€“ wait a minute...

"Astrid, are they holding hands?" he asked quietly. She mercifully stopped her attack on his jaw for an instant to point over-shiny eyes at what he'd nodded at.

"Of course. It's all your doing too, Master Matchmaker," she replied with a snicker. Her hair was only half-gathered again, and it was doing a great job of flicking titillatingly against his face. Sleet had her hand firmly clasped in Dogsbreath's, the shy girl actually chatting with Cami and giggling at her rowdy jokes. It was good to see her smile, and Hiccup was not sure whether it was the arrangement born of politics he had forced upon them himself, the need to protect Sleet once they were back on UglyThug island and she was under her father's roof, or an actual something happening there. But he was glad for the both of them. Sleet was flushed, happily smiling and laughing like she used to in the forge. Dogsbreath, too; it was good to see him here among them again, good to have that air cleared and fresh once more. Hiccup was sad for the misunderstanding, as it had robbed them of nearly the entire time the allied tribes had been there. Dogsbreath was almost as shy as Sleet, Hiccup had discovered, and equally, terribly innocent in certain thought patterns.

They had all agreed to come next spring. The dragon lessons would begin as soon as the ice broke. The Winter past Snoggletog was usually colder and icier until the ice-giants' hold on their home would relent into the brief but balmy Spring. And then, of course, Spring brought wedding feasts. He smiled to himself, feeling confusedly, happily horrified. They would all be back by then. He looked forward to that, too.

They will also have hopefully sorted Cami's business on the sly, too. The news Dogsbreath had shared a few days ago was too important to bother with anything else right now - although it was looking like, honestly, his dad and the others had everything under control. The patrols had even come up with not a few signs of ship-debris, so if they were lucky, Ras had swallowed them all up. But he wasn't one to leave his chances up to the Nixes, and neither was his father. Still,

once that was out of the way, hopefully before Snoggletog, _then_ he could tell his dad about Cami's problem, and it's solution.

He sighed and leaned into Astrid again, and he had to admit, he was gratified to hear her sentence to Ruff falter slightly, but tried not to let it show too much. He'd probably pay for it later. A growl caught his ear, and he looked around to see Toothless making doe eyes at Dryleaf, who was chuckling at him as she dangle a dry fish for him. Dartfoot and Ætta were sitting on his saddle, safely strapped in and laughing at whatever game Dryleaf had come up with while he carted the two 'Viking Princesses' around. Hiss the terror was clinging to Ætta's shoulder, half-snoozing through the lights and din.

The girls sang a song and clapped their hands to it, and Toothless was rewarded with the fish when he went through a number of movements on the girl's cues, making them laugh and giggle enthusiastically when he smacked his chops and licked his nose. Hiccup wondered if Toothless was suffering the lack of flying, open space, air and sky half as much as he was - his friend had apparently found vent to his energy much better than Hiccup had.

"He's going to be terrible with your children. You'll have to pry him off to be able to hold our first born for more than five minutes," Astrid chuckled into his ear. Hiccup laughed quietly before a flush rose up his cheeks. "I hope he'll let me hold it long enough to feed the baby, or we'll have a fussy, over-cuddled child and a confused dragon."

The twin feelings of terrified elation and choking restriction rose in his throat. He didn't dare take his eyes away from Toothless as Astrid continued watching and chuckling, her chin on his shoulder. It was so impossibly stupid, to be so afraid of losing her, and yet at once feel so tied down, and so utterly trapped with all that was expected of him when she spoke of it with such nonchalance.

He was just learning how to be a son; how could be a husband and a father too, so quickly?

But she was also talking about it, and she was saying it with such a natural casualness, as if the idea didn't disgust her at all. And he'd be lying if he didn't say that his prospects in life before, when he was Cattongue always cold and alone, had broken his heart. He craved holding a child, having a family, with this woman, just as much as it terrified him and made him feel choked right now.

Thoughts for another time and another day he decided, when Toothless trotted towards them with the two girls still firmly 'riding' him, grin on his gummy mouth in triumph.

"Yeah, you're popular with the ladies, we get it," Hiccup deadpanned with a smirk, earning a snort and a half-lidded '_don't you know it_' expression. The night fury bumped his flat head against Hiccup's chest, and then nosed Astrid too, accepting indiscriminate pets as Hiss climbed onto Astrid's shoulders, and Ætta followed in disgruntled, whiny protests that probably indicated bed-time was close by. The child chased the terror around their feet for a while as Toothless sat down and licked some crumbs off Dartfoot's hands, but then the little blonde girl gave up with a huff, sitting

resolutely in Hiccup's lap.

"Stay there all you like then, see if I care." She pouted, and then actually glared at Astrid. "Hiss likes you more than me. But Uncle Hiccup likes me better."

"I do?" Hiccup asked, trying not to laugh. The little girl gave him an incredibly familiar glare, and Astrid choked back a startled snort as she recognised it herself.

"You do!" Åttta chirped in a warning voice. Had he not chastised her the last time she'd punched him, she would probably have done it,

"Ah, sorry Aunty Astrid," Hiccup said playfully.

"No stealing my husband away, now," she admonished playfully, trying very hard not to chuckle if her flushed cheeks were any indication.

"He's my husband too," Åttta said in a proud, piping voice, and when Hiccup held his hands up in mock surrender, Astrid lost her battle with laughter.

"Didn't know you were a ladies' man," Ruff drawled from Astrid's other side, and Hiccup bit his thumb at her over Åttta's head, which she did right back to much snorting around the table.

Dryleaf came over, taking her daughter - who was now yawning widely - and saluting the entire table before moving towards the hall doors. Åttta began nodding off in Hiccup's lap, and he let her fall asleep right there, stroking her hair.

"It's like going back in time," he whispered to Astrid, who was looking at the little girl fondly. She turned the gaze to him, and kissed his cheek, burying her face in his neck and mumbling something he didn't catch. He wondered how much she'd drunk, and held her close. Åttta curled up further against his chest, and Toothless put his head on the bench right next to Hiccup, the dragon's body curled around them as the his breath puffed against Hiccup's thigh.

His mind flickered to a recent memory; just a few weeks ago, him holding Woodnut and Astrid in his arms, Toothless still coiled around them protectively, wondering if it could ever be true. This new image burned into his head beside it, with Astrid winding both arms around him and this sweet little girl, sighing his name as her eyes fluttered, and Toothless huffing in obvious contentment.

Yes, yes. It was possible. Perhaps, after that last hurdle was skipped. It was terrifying, choking and mind-boggling. But it was so, so beautiful.

"Oi!" Thuggory said suddenly, startling them out of their thoughts. Hiccup looked up at him, Astrid tilting her head against his shoulder to glare at him a good one. "No fair, you're cheating! MY baby is going to be the eldest new heir! Mine! How'd yours get so big so fast!"

Hiccup burst out laughing, regretting it a moment later when Åttta jolted awake with a startled sob, forcing Hiccup and Astrid to turn

their full attention to her as they soothed her back into a snooze.

"We should take her home," Astrid sighed. He didn't want to leave the comfort, company and merriment of the Hall either, not this early, and not when he wouldn't be seeing most of his friends until the season turned after tomorrow. But Åtta mumbled and put her finger in her mouth, and there was no argument that would hold.

"Our hall is closer," he replied gently. "Ruff, Brunhilda's got your daughter anyway tonight. You mind telling her we've put this little one to bed with us?"

"Eh, sure," the woman shrugged. The child was swaddled in his cloak as the four of them made their way down the steps and into the dark Hall. Quick, quiet maneuvering lit the fire and put the slightly fussy child into one of Hiccup's old tunics which fit her like a long dress with dangly sleeves. Astrid's long night clothing and undone hair appeared next, and he quickly put on his own sleeping clothes before she could propose to help him - he wasn't sure if she'd had enough drink to forget that seeking fingers and a sleepy, tiny guest didn't mix.

But he shouldn't have worried - or perhaps he should have? - because she took Åtta up into her arms, and began heading for the stairs.

"Hey, where are you going?" he asked quietly. Toothless had already curled up under his bed, Hiss curled against his haunch, and the dragon barn was quiet enough to tell him the other dragons had called an early night.

"Bed?" she replied. He gestured to his own vaguely.

"There's one big enough here right next to the fire," he said, feeling brave and more than a little hopeful. Her feet pattered back across the wood instantly, and she quickly laid the little girl down, climbing in beside her. With slightly shaky legs, he climbed in on the other side, cautiously putting an arm around them before he relaxed when she melted into it. Åtta sighed contentedly and burrowed more deeply into their chest. Hiccup looked into Astrid's eyes over her head, sharing the same pillow.

"Goodnight," she whispered.

"Goodnight."

He lay awake long after everyone else in the hall had fallen asleep, trying to sort the forest-dense emotions in his chest as he held both girls in his arms, their breathing caressing his face and chest.

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Dogsbreath ran up the hill at breakneck speed. It was early; hellishly early. He'd gotten up an extra half-hour before his usual time, intending to sneak out, take Farthog and go for a quick round - not a real patrol, and not to say that he did not trust the men on patrol already. But the situation made him edgy, and Sleet was safe in the communal hall.

He was arrested by the utter horror of the empty barn.

He'd looked around, tried to whistle as quietly as possible, but his gronkle had vanished without a trace. With a sigh and a grumble, he'd almost determined to go back inside when he remembered that Farthog had recently often been sidling up to Fishleg's gronkle, and he had quickly jogged there to see if his silly dragon had gone off to sleep with the Ingermann's again.

He'd found a barn door thrown open, the outside bar clearly bitten through, and an empty barn. He'd knocked the Ingermann awake, almost getting punched in the face by the crazy girl-twin before Fishlegs had understood what he was saying and rushed out to the barn. His dismayed squeaks and panicked calling of his dragon's name had confirmed that he had not known of their disappearance either.

Both of them had been determined to set out for the woods, to try to see if the two dragons had somehow gotten it into their heads to go wild and free again, when Tuffnut ran up, demanding his Zippleback back. Ruffnut had first punched him in the face and then blinked at him owlishly, telling him to get in line to find missing dragons. Cami - who had been with the boy-twin for some reason Dogsbreath did not want to think about, scowled and said that Sting did sometimes go out in the night, but came back by morning, and now she was beginning to get worried.

Clearly, they needed Hiccup.

He knocked on the Haddock hall insistently, receiving no answer, and then had to do the rude thing and just barge in. Hiccup was just emerging from behind the curtain, and Dogsbreath felt his cheeks go hot when he heard his betrothed's voice asking him to skin whoever woke them up from bed.

Stoick walked out of his own bedchamber a moment later, and a slightly embarrassing plateau arrested their feet to the ground. Astrid joined them quickly after, the tiny child they'd left with yesterday in her arms, and though she seemed initially flustered that she was being seen in her sleeping clothes, she did her best to give him a deathly glare as she shivered.

"Who's dying?" she asked. "Because someone had better be, or someone will be soon."

"The dragons," he replied, breathlessly. "They're gone."

Hiccup blinked, running his face to dissipate the sleep-fog and throwing a log into the waned fire, the hall unusually cold. Toothless instantly perked awake and shot a flame at it.

"Toothless is here," he said groggily. "What's happening?"

"Farthog and Meatlug are gone. So are Flat-Fart and Sting."

Hiccup's gaze sharpened and he opened his mouth to reply when a dismayed sound came from the barn.

"Hiccup!"

Dogsbreath exchanged a glance with the other two and they ran to the adjacent door. The barn's door was agar, letting in the cold air which explained the chill inside. All three stalls were empty.

"Odin help us," Stoick hissed, and then quickly returned to the hall to dress. Hiccup rushed back himself, and for the second time since his arrival on the shores of Berk, Dogsbreath found himself with an arm-full of sleepy child.

"Hello," she said, blinking up at him through long lashes. "My name is Åtta. What's yours?"

"Dogsbreath," he replied distractedly as he followed everyone around with his eyes; the Haddocks were, apparently, justifiably preparing to stave off whatever panic would take hold of Berk once everyone else woke up. The child in his arms poked his shoulder.

"Why is everyone looking so sad and rushing about?" she asked again. Her large blue eyes were looking up at him with an expression he would have called shrewd if she were not so tiny.

"Well, some of the dragons are â€| erâ€| playing. At hiding. And we have to find them," he replied. Her eyes grew even bigger, and she began to wriggle madly; Frigga, Ever Patient Mother, why was he given all the wiggly-children of Berk to hold? Then he let out a surprised oomph when she kicked him with unexpected force in the belly, hopping down from his arms and racing towards the curtained off area.

"Hiss!" she began calling in a piping little voice. "Hiss! Oh Uncle Hiccup, where's Hiss?" With a wince for a completely different reason, he remembered the tiny terror who'd been with the girl the night before. If it was any indication, the furious glare from a half-dressed Astrid meant he was going to die, later. Great.

"I'm going on ahead," Stoick replied, emerging from his small room fully decked out in armour. "There's sure to be a panic. Don't be long."

"Almost done," Hiccup replied, hopping out as he rolled his trouser pant down over the prosthetic and grabbed a fur cape to throw over his half-assembled armour. "Astrid, see if you can leave Åtta with your mum, and come up to the Hall, ok? Toothless is still here, at least, and I'm going to make a recon-roundtrip to see if I can spot anything. Åtta," he stopped, kneeling down very briefly to give the child a hug and rising again. "Uncle Hiccup is going out to check, be a good girl and do what Aunty Astrid and nana tell you to do."

"Hiccup!" Astrid stopped him briefly. "If they've been taken, Toothless may be a target too. Be on the lookout; and maybe you are too, and â€| "

Hiccup kissed her, effectively stopping her slightly panicked spiel.

"Been there, done that, remember? I'm fine, trust me." Astrid nodded at him wordlessly, and Dogsbreath felt supremely uncomfortable to see Hiccup's brief returned kiss as Astrid held the girl's hand. Ye gods in Asgard, he felt so bloody awkward.

He was very glad when they left the hall, but only for a few moments. People had evidently begun to rise, and the alarm was walking more and more of the Berkian folk. Stoick was going to have his hands full - and Hiccup.

"What in Forseti's law has happened?" Hoark said rushing up.
"Everyone's dragon is gone! Toothless is the only one I've seen all morn'!"

Hiccup gave his companion a worried look, and Toothless looked at the sky, sniffing with great interest. Hiccup narrowed his eyes at him.

"Bud, do you think you have a trail?" he asked sharply. Toothless's eyes narrowed too, and for an instance he seemed almost about to growl at his human friend. Then he shook himself bodily, butted his snout against Hiccup's chest and nodded back towards the saddle.

"Got you," Hiccup replied, though he looked none too easily at Toothless. "Bud, you think the trail will hold a few hours? I have to tell people where we're going, and prepare us for the journey. Remember when we decided to go from Crete to Athens?" Toothless rolled his eyes in what was obviously a share reminisce of the negative kind. Then he seemed to consider for a moment, gave a few more sniffs and nodded. "Good. Hoark, tell my father that I'll be at the Hall in a few minutes; Dogsbreath, I'm sorry to ask you this, but I need you to go tell your father and the other clan heads to meet in the Hall. Oh! And â€œ tell your father I said to 'go ahead'. Dad may have forgotten."

Dogsbreath blinked. Then shuddered as he understood exactly how deep the shit-pit they'd landed in was. If they did not manage to solve this situation quickly enoughâ€œ without the dragons, theyâ€œ

His heart was in his throat as he left Hiccup, rushing off towards his clan's guest hall. They had to get them; if news of this _leaked_â€œ they had to get them at once!

=0=

Astrid had to admit that she was growing rather impatient, and felt terrible for it. Åttta was being difficult, because she was a sleepy, upset child. Yet she couldn't deny that she was holding her temper in by a very thin thread.

"But Aunty Astrid, Hiss is so tiny. What if Uncle Hiccup can't find him among all the other dragons?" she said in a whine, wiping at her eyes even though she was containing her tears. Good girl; a Hofferson already. Astrid tried once again to capture the elusive, tiny hand and stuff it into the girl's sleeve. Oh Asgard above, when she had agreed to watch the child yesterday, the night's epilogue had been a lovely, unexpected surprise, but now she was beginning to regret it.

"You just need to trust that Uncle Hiccup will bring the terror back with him," she said distractedly, smoothing out the crumpled clothing and trying to get the wiggly girl into her tunic. When Åttta began bouncing on her bottom, she snapped. "Will you sit still!"

The child stopped instantly, looking at Astrid with very wide eyes that watered instantly. But she bit her lip, looked down and apologised, holding both her hands out and looking down in palpable remorse.

Astrid felt like she'd splashed Stormfly with mud.

"It's alright, Åttta," she replied with a sigh, smoothing the girl's hair and reaching for her own comb, beginning to untangle the messy locks. "If Aunty Astrid is honest, she's worried about Stormfly, too," she finally sighed, tying off the girl's hair in one, long braid instead of her usual two.

"Really?" Åttta replied, looking up at Astrid in open astonishment. "But Stormfly is big and strong."

"Of course," Astrid replied, turning the girl around and gathering her into her lap. She was in a hurry, yes, but Åttta didn't have to suffer for it. With a heave, she stood with the child in her arms, retreating behind Hiccup's curtain with the rest of her own clothes and making short work of them as Åttta waiting on his bed. "But Aunty cares for her dragon, and not knowing where she went makes me worried. Just as I am going to be very worried about Uncle Hiccup when he's gone, even if he's a strong warrior."

It wasn't an untruth; she only wished he'd been in the room so she could have seen his cheeks colour. Ah, she didn't even know how long he'd be, when he'd be back, if he was to find at least a trace of them. What if he didn't find them? What if something happened to him, and -

"Oh, but that's silly, Aunty Astrid," Åttta replied, looking much happier now that she seemed to feel she knew something more than her namesake. When Astrid gave her questioning look, she smiled back widely, kicking her feet. "Uncle Hiccup made you a promise to marry you, and he hasn't married you yet, so he won't be long!"

"Oh?" Astrid replied, pausing to look at the girl in amusement. Åttta obviously found her vocalisation to be doubtful in some way, and folded her arms with a jutted jaw.

"Of course. Uncle Hiccup keeps promises."

"And how are you so sure that he does?" Astrid replied, turning to sit beside the girl on the bed and fit her boots on, interested despite herself.

"He told me!" Åttta replied conspiratorially. Tiny, uncertain hands caught onto two or three of Astrid's fingers, and the older Hofferson lent her the appendage obligingly. After a few failed attempts, Åttta managed to hook her tiniest finger with Astrid's own, and then bumped it into her chest. "Uncle Hiccup told me that Aunty Astrid helps him and his pappa by cooking for them because Uncle's food tastes like dragon poop." Astrid held in a snort by a hair. "But that he is holding Aunty Astrid here in his heart!" she bumped their joined hands against her chest again, beaming up at Astrid after she paused for a moment to make sure their fingers were woven properly. "Just like this!"

Then she frowned. "Aunty Astrid, it's not nice to forget the promise you made with Uncle Hiccup. Because you promised to marry him too, no?"

"Yes," Astrid replied, taking the girl up in her arms and marching determinately towards the door. Her chest was threatening to burst open at Åtta's innocent little revelation, and this feeling which had been growing inside her had finally expanded until it left no room for anything else.

"When did he tell you of this promise?" she asked, when they were crossing the plaza, Astrid avoiding any summons at all costs; she could not get side-tracked.

"When he gave me my new dolls!" she replied happily, large eyes following all the frantic happenings around her curiously over Astrid's shoulder. "When my chest stopped hurting. He was the first one nana let in just before she took me to the outhouse again, andâ€œ" Åtta launched into a colourful retelling of her adventure in the outhouse after so long locked inside while Astrid could feel a smile spread on her face as far as it would go.

She was going to find that man and punch him in the face for making such gross assumptions about what he could and couldn't do with his promises. Then she was going to kiss him until he forgot what his name was.

Åtta was received with open arms by the women who were still inside the Hofferson house. Her own mother was probably running around the island with the elder to see what could be done, but Åtta's mamma was not much of a warrior and had at least been in the hall to take her child back. Sprinting across the paths, avoiding people and cursing her own laziness at having grown so used to travelling by dragon, her mind buzzed with things to do.

Luckily, she spotted Snotlout talking to one of the red-haired barmaids and made a beeline for him.

"Snotlout!" she called, interrupting whatever involved conversation they were having. She'd apologise for it later. "You're not in the Hall? Hiccup wanted to call a meeting - is it done already?" Shit. She needed to prepare his travel pack, make sure he was well stocked, warm â€œ she had one prepared for herself at all times. She'd pillage it and give it all to him.

"No, it was a short one. It went right over my head, but everyone seemed to know what everyone else was saying." He rolled his shoulders uncomfortably as the barmaid looked at him worriedly, her arm sneaking around his beefy one. Well, well! "Anyway, what all I got is that they're putting Berk on lockdown. Sending the lot of women and children to the safe place, and putting up rosters and patrols. Not sure why, but it seems everyone's feeling a little paranoid with the dragons gone." Snotlout frowned. "I suppose better safe than sorry. There was some talk of sending the ships ahead, and it got a bit hot there, but I don't get why as Snoggletog's at the door. In the end they all decided to stay here." Snotlout shrugged. Then he smiled. "Oh, and some UglyThug blokes got arrested. Three generals. Don't know what about, but I didn't like the looks about them anyway. I'm off on guard duty myself in a bit."

A spark went off in Astrid's head. Sleet's stilted and partial hints began to finally make sense; Astrid's mother hadn't believed her when she'd said she didn't know all the story, only that there was some danger approaching Berk somehow. Astrid, however, only knew what Sleet had told her - that her father had conspired with two others to bring about the downfall of the current tribe chiefs. Sleet herself apparently knew nothing of the hows or whys, the girl had only left her with a pall of dark worry, and the instant mastering of Berk's female forces.

Snotlout looked at her grim face, and seemed to understand something more was afoot.

"See that you guard those arseholes like they were honey from bees," she hissed, putting a hand on his arm. She hadn't quite forgiven him for what he'd done to her yet, but she knew that, at least, his remorse and regard for Hiccup was sincere and that was all she needed. "Hiccup's going to need them well covered while he takes care of everything else."

Snotlout's jaw tightened. He gave the barmaid a side-long glance - Lauga, her name was Lauga - and she let her arm drop.

"I'll take her home and get to it. I have a few minutes but â€œ|" He nodded at Astrid, and she once again sprinted towards the Haddock hall, hoping against hope that she would be on time.

Slightly out of breath and sweating, she loped up the hill just on time to see Hiccup fastening a saddlebag onto Toothless' leather rigging, helmet balanced on his head acting like a vizor, blocking the surprisingly strong sun-rays from his ever moving eyes.

"Already?" she asked breathlessly. He looked up at her with a grim face and nodded, fingers still nimbly working their spidery efficiency at his saddle. Toothless gave her a nudge and she absently stroked his head.

"Before everyone changes their mind. Some of them were none-too-happy that the last dragon on Berk is heading out." He gave a buckle a final tug. "But just _because _Toothless is the last dragon, we need to head out while the scent is fresh and he can follow. We don't know what's going on, and we have to make sure to solve this before â€œ| the scent trail's out."

He shrugged. Astrid quelled the urge to shake him and demand to know what exactly was going on. The cloud of dread in her stomach puffed out and thundered, but she grabbed his hand and hauled him standing instead.

"Stay right here. I'll only be a few moments, you hear? Stay right there!"

She rushed inside, taking the stairs two by two and grabbing her travel pack - for a wild moment, the thought of joining him flitted through her mind - but her legs kept moving, and the idea was dismissed before it could fully form, her added weight not conducive to the speed he needed.

She paused only briefly at the new table, snatching up the string of

her work-in-progress and flew out the front door again.

"Here," she told him, with no room for argument. "You have provisions and blankets. Ignore some of the things - it's mine, I always have it ready."

"I couldn't possibly -"

"Yes, yes you can. Now tie this up to Toothless, too. I'm sure he'll be happy to know you're not going out there with whatever provisions you think are enough." The dragon snorted at his rider, who resigned himself to being outnumbered and bullied, and added the pack to Toothless' burden. As he stood back up facing her. Astrid bit her lip, looking up from her unfinished work.

"This is â€| not ready yet," she said with some shame, putting the string over her head and looking up at him. The half-carved figure of Mjolnir, elaborate designs only thinly scratched out on it, bounced against her belly.

"Is that â€|?" He looked up at her under his lashes. "I'll take it as it is, you know."

"No," she replied, and then impulsively reached behind her, undoing the clasp of her silver pendent and stepping forward. Getting onto her tiptoes, she clasped it around his neck and his arms came up around her. "Hold onto that. I want it back, you hear? We'll exchange them once the one I'm making is done."

He gave her an uncertain, flattered smile, and then she stretched the rest of the way and kissed him, hard and strong, with all the emotion that now occupied the entirety of her chest. She felt his fingers brush her cheek and ear, and pulled back before he could feel her shiver. Then she grabbed his hand, threaded his smallest finger with hers and pressed it to her chest.

"Promise me you'll be back before tomorrow," she said. He looked down at his hand, blushing probably more for the fact that she was in the know of his little gesture than that his knuckles were brushing her breasts. Maybe.

"Um, I can't know thatâ€|"

"Promise you'll be back soon," she amended. "Before Snoggletog."

Snoggletog was four days away. He smiled at her.

"I can do that. This is only recon, I should be back tomorrow afternoon." He kissed her again, briefly, and then walked backwards until he hopped onto his dragon. "Just promise me to keep that flower where it is!"

"Flower?" she asked as he shot into the sky. She looked down at her clothes, then encountered something soft when she patted her ear.

"Aw, look at you, trying to be all girly?" said Ruffnut, always in the right place to catch some fun. Astrid felt her face grow hot.

"Hiccup, I'm going to kill you as soon as you're back!" she threatened, but a laugh undermined her words.

"Promise?" he shot back, looping Toothless in the sky to give the parting shot, laughter audible even as high as he was until he shot away.

"Count on it!"

"Kill him, huh?" Ruffnut sniggered again, hefting the pile of spears she was handling. Astrid felt herself go hot all over when she remembered the other meaning of the phrase. She sniffed playfully at Ruffnut, throwing a stone her way and retreating into the house with a trail of swearwords following as the female twin dropped her cargo.

Kill him. Wow â€“ well, she'd promised, she thought with a sly smile. In the privacy of the empty hall, she took the flower from her hair, and saw that it was a snowdrop; probably the first of the season. With a shake of the head, she slipped it back behind her ear - she'd put it between two pages of the dragon book later, and then pile heavy jars over it.

The inside of the hall was warm, the glow of the fire cheery and sweet against her chilled, blushing cheeks. There was so much to do, so little time and certainty, and yetâ€“

Astrid headed behind the curtain, looking at his strewn belongings haphazardly thrown in his haste. She gathered it all and folded it, but did not put it on his shelves. With armfuls of his various outfits, she rushed up the wooden stairs and looked around her own space.

This room used to be his. It was only right that now that he could walk properly again, they should â€“ share it.

The decision made her feel flushed and jittery. She shouldn't be making it on her own, if she were honest, instead talking it out with him when he got back. But she was determined; she'd rather move to his bed downstairs behind the curtain than confine him there another day. Not to mention; they were betrothed. They would be married next spring. The contract was signed and transaction completed. Any child they had would be happily accepted, she was sure, as the child of a great man and a good warrior. They had nothing to be ashamed of. Sure, he'd made her an oath, but according to Ruff there was a world of things they could do which did not involve anything going in anywhere.

By the time the front door opened, Stoick calling out to her - probably to see why she was not out there, helping out as was her duty - half the shelves, half the floor and some weapon hooks had been cleared for his shield and his sword, his clothes deposited neatly beside hers. She had placed some of the little exotic trinkets he had brought back around the room for him, to rearrange as he pleased, and they made her even more excited with their shiny newness; a part of her wondered if he'd ever take her out there, to the Great Beyond. She couldn't go on her own - she didn't have that drive to see as he had - but if she went, she'd certainly go with him. He wasn't leaving her behind again.

Hearing Stoick come up the stairs, she started trying to wipe her face with her hands, probably only making it worse. She knew she was probably a little smudged with dust, but she looked proudly around the newly-polished room as Stoick mounted the steps.

"Astrid, I'd like you to go give a hand at the docks forâ€|" He blinked, looking around the candle-lit room, newly wiped down surfaces gleaming and empty spaces. She suddenly blushed at the scrutiny, realising there was another person she should have asked before she just went ahead; the head of their household.

"Um â€| Hiccup's outgrown that little curtained corner a little, I think," she said sheepishly. "I was thinking of offering a space up here when he comes back tomorrow, if that's ok?"

"Where would you sleep?" he asked, but there was a gleam in his eyes that said he knew exactly what she had in mind. She felt herself blush; clearly, she was an idiot and hadn't thought things through â€| _kill_ him, really, what was she thinkingâ€|

"Well, it depends on what Hiccup would prefer," she said vaguely, shrugging a shoulder. "We can always get the bed his has downstairs up. Or I can move there."

"Or you can both stay here," Stoick said, a grin spreading through his mustache, visible only from a gleaming tooth and crinkled eyes. She blushed at being caught, but still tried for nonchalance.

"Depends on Hiccup's preference," she said with as disinterested a tone as possible, shrugging a shoulder. Stoick gave a laugh and clapped her on the shoulder.

"Well, lass. Your dowry's right there. You just tell me or your mother if you two need the wedding moved up, aye?" He gave her the wiggle-brows. Oh Asgard, her future father-in-law was giving her the wiggle-brows. "Now, you've been up here for about four hours, lass. I really need you to go down to the docks, keep an eye on how the provisions are being set. Spitelout's there, but I know how you like to keep an eye on where all the food goes, so-"

He was interrupted by a flash that whitened everything through all the cracks in their wooden hall, and then a loud, startling clash of thunder. Both of them blinked at one another at the violence of the sound, and they ran noisily down the stairs, throwing the front door open, only to be greeted by an even louder report of thunder, the horizon covered in menacing black clouds and a gale beginning to whip up stray belongings. A cyclon of grey clouds was twirling on the steel-coloured sea, savagely whipping up the waves and threatening to rip apart anything it touched; alive or dead, dragon or human.

"It's an East wind again," said Stoick with some satisfaction. Astrid could not care less.

"Oh noâ€|" she said, dread rising up her throat and threatening to choke her. "If â€| if it's been four hours â€| Hiccup's in _that_. He got caught in it; over the sea!"

Stoick paled beside her.

"There's â€œ there's nothing we can do. We have to trust that he knows what he's doing," the chief finally said. Astrid couldn't bring herself to swallow the lump in her airway. "Go to the docs. I'll get the rest of the village to safety in the Hall."

For the second time that day, Astrid raced across the village, sprinting to her destination. This time, however, her thoughts were taken up with prayers of mercy to Thor and Ras.

She couldn't lose him now. She couldn't.

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The exits are here, here, here â€œ everywhere!

19. Uprooting

Hi everyone! A warning; the line forming to kill Hiccup must start behind the sprayed white line â€œ|

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 17 - Uprooting_

**I give you this to take with you: Nothing remains as it was. If you know this, you can begin again, with pure joy in the uprooting.**

â€• _**Judith Minty**_

This is amazingâ€œ|

Hiccup hadn't seen this much sun on a Winter's day in Berk for many years. Even the summer was dotted with rainclouds and hail, sometimes, getting disgruntled farmers to scramble for the woven cloths to cover their crops.

But to have one in Winter was almost impossible. It was almost like a boon from the gods.

"WOOOHOOO!" he yelled as Toothless, feeling his own elation at finally, _finally_ being in the air again, began to whirl and twirl in the sky. Hiccup spread his arms, letting the cool wind hit him and resisting the urge to let himself slip off the saddle as Toothless let out repeated blasts of elated fire at the sparse clouds around them. "The sea stacks! Bud, remember, the last time we were there, we almost died! Let's do that again!"

Toothless gave an enthusiastic screech and off they were, whizzing past rock formations and being bathed in freezing sea foam as they passed a hair's breadth away from the raging waves.

Another enthusiastic whoot escaped him once they were clear of the rocks, pointed towards the open sea and the dotted tiny islands that surrounded Berk. Toothless first barrel rolled, then began to korkscrew, making Hiccup laugh. As they approached another sea stack, Hiccup finally gave in to the temptation, warned Toothless and jumped off, running a few steps on the vertical surface of the rock before he launched himself back onto his battle-brother's saddle, who gave a screechy laugh at Hiccup's 'oomph', but who levelled his flight obligingly until Hiccup could hitch himself back in properly.

"Oh bud, you have no idea how much I missed this!" he exclaimed, his voice bubbling in unashamed excitement. "I've wanted to be out here with you for an untold forever! You just have no idea how boring it is to listen to all that and having to pretend you're interested when all I wanted to do was grab an updrift with you!"

Toothless gave a warble. His wings swept upwards with just enough force to nudge Hiccup's shoulder in a double tap.

"I know, you were with me the whole time. But you could fall asleep, you lazy lizard. I certainly couldn't put my face in my hands and snore!" A snort. "Though I wanted to, yes!"

Toothless gave a triumphant croon at the admissions and spiralled upwards, diving into cotiony clouds gathering in the limpid blue sky. With a cry, the overjoyed dragon let himself fall backwards and they were once again spiralling down, going as fast as the wind before they righted themselves and raised two waves of water around them in their flight strength. The dragon and his boy both laughed in elation as the drops glittered in the sun like diamonds, making the air they were flying through smell salty, fresh and free.

"Gods be praised," Hiccup sighed, letting himself fall back on Toothless, who seemed to take it as a sign that cruising was in order and opened his wings wide searching for an updrift. As soon as he found it, both of them were drifting lazily upwards, keeping a steady pace and rise while unhurriedly taking in their surroundings.

"I've missed you, bud," Hiccup said in a murmur, knowing his friend's hearing was acute enough to pick it up. Toothless promptly gave a sad warble that meant the same. "I'm sorry it's been so long since we could do this. Between the leg and â€¢!"

He sighed, the worries of solid ground beginning to creep up on him again. His leg wasn't healing fast enough; stupid thing. He suspected it was his natural and lucky resistance to infection that was keeping him from landing in bed with a high fever. Still, he had to get Toothless to do the painful thing again. Hopefully it would go after two, not like some of the more stubborn sores that had graced his rear end after days and days in-saddle.

Not to mention, he knew the best way to let it heal was to stay off it. Astrid would probably insist on it when he showed it to her. Then instead of in the sky, he'd be stuck in that stupid, musty and ill-lit hall after The Thing. Toothless would get restless, he would get restless, Astrid would be her beautiful irresistible self, and they'd have to talk, and he'd have to tell her about Sepha, and she may leave â€¢!

"Aaarrgh!" He screamed into the sky above him. Toothless underneath him rippled with a start and then grumbled at him. "Sorry, bud. It's just that I used to be able to forget things while we were in the sky. Now I can't seem to anymore. It's like they followed me up here." His dragon gave a sigh and dove slightly, Hiccup's thighs holding on tight as his dragon found another updraft. He crooned, and lifted his head to look at Hiccup as the boy sat up. "I know, Toothless, I'm sorry. It's just, so many thingsâ€| I thought I had it bad when I was alone and it was live or die, but now there is so much happening, and I just can't seem to â€|"

Hiccup looked around him disconsolately. the limpid blue sky, some clouds gathering here and there. The northern sea, grey and ever choppy, the gulls calling and sea birds flying this way and that. The salt in the air and sun on his skin, even through the helmet. He wanted all this back; it used to bring him peace of mind and a quiet sort of joy that he would then use to face his problems, solvable or unsolvable. But it seemed that now, even this little nook of his, this place that had only ever been him and Toothless, was being taken away.

He felt that he was suffocating, even though he was surrounded by miles and miles of nothing.

With a sigh and a slump in his shoulders, Hiccup grabbed hold of the reigns, cranking them into position and bending over them to increase Toothless' speed. His dragon brother warbled, giving a questioning glance with his talkative eyes.

"We really should get to it, bud. We've wasted â€|" he looked up at the sky, "... almost an hour, wow. It feels like I just blinked and we were just taking off. You still have the trail, right?" he asked, somewhat with belated worry. Toothless scoffed at him, and Hiccup relaxed with a half-chuckle as they set themselves on the right course and began zipping across the water, Berk's murky shores falling farther and farther behind. They'd been racing for another two hours, trying to make up for lost time, before they spoke again.

"Bud, do you know what's going on? Why they all left?" he said, head close to his dragon's as they whizzed forward. "In all that, I never got the chance to ask you."

Toothless gave a nod, though he seemed distracted as his eyes began whipping left and right.

"What happened, did you lose the- " He sat up straighter as Toothless slowed down, and then he heard a noise that made him sit up very straight with dread and worry. "Shit!"

Thunder. Strong, wide, deadly, like the sounds of a crashing tree. Thick, roiling clouds were quickly climbing the horizon towards them, a spout already beginning to reach down in a twirling cone towards the sea. Lightning spread across the black mass in a silver web, the noise following it almost deafening. With hurried fingers, Hiccup quickly flung his helmet off, knowing all too well how Thor loved to play tag with metal - it made sense that he would try to mould it to his liking, being the divine blacksmith. But it had consequences he did not want to think about when human - or dragon - flesh got in the god's way of perfecting the metal to whatever shape he

desired.

"Bud, it's heading straight for us!" Hiccup hissed, angry at himself for dallying, angry at himself for not noticing the signs of a storm before, angry at himself for so many things as the first strong gusts of wind began buffeting them left and right. Toothless could break a wing in this wind. He could lose a wing. That was never, ever happening to his brother.

"Toothless!" he called as a particularly strong gale almost sent them spiralling. A freezing rain began driving down on top of them, water dripping into his eyes and making his semi-chilled fingers slip from the reigns as more and more lightning strikes began to circle them like hungry wolves. The compass on his wrist rattled and caught his eye, a dangerously close stroke of lightning illuminating its direction even as it made his teeth itch and his hair stand on end.

"Toothless, we're close to our island! Gods preserve us - get down, get down!" he yelled, head close to his dragons as he became nearly blind between the constant alternating white flashes and dense darkness of clouds, the water on his face and in his mouth and electrified air smelling of blood and burned water. Toothless folded his wings, and Hiccup loudly begged for mercy from Thor, who was obviously riding this very cloud above him, asking him for their safe deliverance as their increasing speed of descent made lightning beams race after them.

Thor must have been listening. He did give playful, horrible, cruel chase, but he never did point his lightning directly at them. It was always just to the right, or just to the left, and when Toothless and he manoeuvred for landing, they'd no sooner touched the earth of their tiny island that a tree was struck not five feet from them. Hiccup fell off his saddle, feeling breathless and faint on weak knees at how close the gods' patience and deliverance had come.

"Thank you, Thor," he whispered, and an answering deep gurgle of thunder seemed to be a pleased laugh; almost like one of his father's too strong shoulder pats, that sent him reeling or outright tumbling arse-over-teakettle.

Toothless gave a disconsolate warble, terrified himself and feeling vulnerable and cold out in the rain.

"Come on, bud, let's see how the old place took the last few months of Winter," he said, standing on wobbly legs with the dragon's help and heading with a clipping pace driven by the sleeted downpour up the warn, suddenly unfamiliar path of his home for the past five years.

When he undid the latch and walked in, he almost got the feeling of having just woken up from a dream.

Dream. Nightmare. Dream. He wasn't sure yet.

He was shivering, and Toothless beside him was whining in that way that told Hiccup that he was in danger of getting too cold. Dragons were magnificent but strange creatures; Toothless could sit out in the snow for weeks, even enjoy it. But if he was out in the rain for more than a little while, he ran the risk of losing his fire, and

that, for any fire-breathing dragon, was very, very dangerous. Once their belly got too cold, they would die.

With quick efficiency born of the alarm Toothless' whining brought on, Hiccup ignored his own pervasive trembling and got into the well-known routine: latch the door. Fit the padding around the cracks to keep all the warmth in. The blanket in the corner - wipe Toothless down with it, quickly, quickly! Take his metal rigging off, as fast as possible - it was too cold against his scales. Pile the firewood - fuck! It was mouldy, fuck - break the chair, pile it up - grab the broom and clear the chimney - damn birds and their damn nests.

"Come on, bud, you know you can do this." Hiccup cajoled, rubbing his friend's scaly belly with numb fingers. Toothless gave a whining shiver, but Hiccup's scratching and rubbing fingers seemed to be keeping him focused, so he took a deep breath, and after a few failed attempts, managed to breathe fire onto the wood, which kindled right away under the intense flame. Hiccup breathed a sigh of relief as he slumped against Toothless' side, finally realising how badly he was trembling.

"Great, now I know the gods hate me. It's going to be so easy to do things with sausage fingers," he sighed, teeth chattering as he just knew that he was going to get the worse case of frostbite ever. He held his hands over the fire, and it felt like torture as the mild temperature of the flames were like a hot, melted iron against his still-frozen, semi-unresponsive hands.

There weren't any leaks, and that he was grateful for. He'd spent three weeks, from sun-up to sun-down, patching the old place up before he'd shut it up to go smith Thuggory's axes. He'd hoped he could stay on Freezing, but he'd never had any guarantees so he'd learned to be prepared for everything he could think of.

With the freezing cold, the wound on his leg felt like a knife pointed upwards into his stump. With a groan, he limped towards his small pantry, taking out all the preserves he'd - luckily - forgotten there when he'd come to retrieve his belongings and the sheep. He'd meant to bring them back too, give them to Astrid to add to their Winter stock in her well-managed kitchen. It was lucky that he hadn't; he had cheese that had kept well, salted mutton and some dried fish for Toothless. The milk had frozen solid, but he suspected that it had gone sour anyway. The butter had almost turned into cheese with the cold. Some of the whale fat had festered, but the rest of it was still intact, preserved by the undoubtedly subzero temperatures that took over the shut-up hut.

He brought the lot beside the fire, and then belatedly remembered that he had packed supplies himself. After undoing his prosthetic and exposing his stump to the warming fire, he took off some of his armour and reached back for his pack. He took out the fresh bread and biscuits, and melting some ice hanging on the shelves from previous leaks, he rinsed a skillet and put it on the flames.

Very soon, the hut was awash in the sizzling of warmed fat, the smell of cooking mutton and butter making it seem like just another day on just another desolate Winter storm he and Toothless were facing together.

Hiccup looked around, realising for the first time how much he'd

missed this hut. This was his; his space, a corner of the vast, wide world that he'd claimed for himself and his battle-brother. Toothless curled up around the fire, licking his lips at the warming fish as they dripped ice, Hiccup resting against his belly with feet pointed towards the every-warming flames. His shivers had abated, and his stomach gave a gurgle as he turned the now succulent meat over in the skillet. The hut was well built, but small - nothing near the hall his father had on Berk, so it warmed quickly, and the walls covered in deer and bear pelt kept the temperature from escaping through the wood. The warm glow of the fire illuminated the interior, now sparsely decorated, but usually covered in the bits and bobs he'd accumulated on his travels. He'd left some of the things here - partly in view of the very tiny living space he had back on Berk, and partly because he had always planned to come back here. Keep it as the comfortable bachelor's pad it was, a home away from home if things got too much, an escape to tranquility or a safe house, a stop-station he could rely on during a long journey.

The winds howled around the hut's walls, and Toothless moved anxiously, getting closer to the fire as he always did. Hiccup changed the skillet to the other hand to give his head a comforting pat, and Toothless settled down.

And suddenly, he was Cat tongue again. Alone in the world, with no worry of Thing or Berk or expectation or engagement. It was him, his brother, his hut, and nothing else - their only worry was tomorrow, what they were going to eat, where they were going to fly.

He was so close to it that he could taste it. Freedom. Freedom. Just step outside after the storm, get onto Toothless' saddle. Pack everything he had not yet taken from this place, and go.

Thunder crashed and wind rattled the walls, the lightning and drafts unable to penetrate their cosy little home.

No one would be anything the wiser. Even if Thug came here or brought people here to check, no one really knew what he owned except him, and a barren hut would only mean that he'd taken everything back to Berk last time he'd been here. Berk would think he'd died in the storm, caught by those terrible tendrils of chasing fiery light instead of escaping with the grace of Thor. He'd be free to go East, or West. Or South - back deep, far, South; maybe this time he'd see the desert he'd only heard about. Pass the endless, scalding grains through his fingers. He waved his tingling fingers over the fire, imaging the hot granules escaping his grip. Would it be a different colour to the sand on Berk, which was rocky and ash-grey? They said it shone golden, hot beyond any measure and browning or burning the skin of the unwary who ventured in it without due cover.

Toothless gave a snort behind him, and a slight shiver, so Hiccup blinked out of his imagined free, long, glorious journey. The meat inside the skillet had begun to brown, and he wiped a knife on his trousers to cut it open, the juices making his mouth water. He took it off the fire and reached across, grabbing their two assigned blankets in well rutted routines that needed no thought.

Snuggling under the covers, Toothless wolfing down his fish and toasting happily under the black bear pelt, shiny green eyes heavy; Hiccup blowing on his food and eating with his mouth open in his

impatience to let it cool; he suddenly felt like himself again. He was Cat tongue, able to travel through anything and anywhere, deal with almost every situation so long as Toothless was beside him. The pain in his leg even felt reduced as he felt himself drift off with a smile, his belly warm and full, and his mind full of golden sand, rich merchandise and hole-in-the wall places only he knew that could remain his, and that he was obliged to share with no one if he did not want to.

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"Is everyone inside?" Stoick yelled, herding the stream of Vikings into the Great Hall. Even though the guests numbered only a few, considering, the Great Hall was already feeling more packed than usual. Astrid counted sheep heads with Mulch and the other farmers, bringing them to a tally before she shot to make sure all the remaining dragons were enclosed beside their owners as well. Adderbite, an older wild nadder who had stayed behind with very few others, gave a gargle as she passed by, and she paused to pat her.

"Hey girl," she murmured, her voice reedy and light as she stroked her distractedly, that ever growing ball of apprehension threatening to eat her whole.

They were herding people into the Hall because this storm looked like it was one which would take lives and halls indiscriminately. No doubt, there would be some unroofed halls, some broken or buried property. Hopefully no deaths - well, save Mildew, all the way back there. Nobody knew where he was unless he turned up here, and frankly nobody cared a whit. Not after how he'd tried to bad-mouth Hiccup last week, and he'd been boo'd out of the Hall covered in rotten shark. It had given her a thrill of victory she didn't think she would experience for someone else's sake, but Hiccup'd been in the arena with the chiefs and their heirs, and she hadn't yet gotten up the courage to go into a full-blown retelling of it; she feared she would fall into gushing a little too quickly.

Her chest gave another massive twist and her stomach churned like she was going to be sick. The wind howling around the hall like a passing ghoel, screaming and disconsolate, a soul of the dead lost at sea and never to receive proper burial.

With that thought, it finally became too much. Grabbing Adderbite and an emergency harness, she directed her towards the tower-sized doors of the hall, her other hand grasping the half-finished figure of Thor's great hammer hanging from her neck.

He had to come back. He had to receive his hammer amulet. He had to give her back her own. Belatedly she realised that if he were lost, he would take the symbol of her waiting vigil with him; as if freeing her from their arrangement. The thought sent another wave of twisted emotions through her, like freezing water through the cracks in rock, jagged and cold; impossibly, endlessly circular.

Stoick was just about to push the doors shut when she managed to drift through the people streaming in, her dragon in close tow as they moved through the crowds.

"I'm going to see if there's anyone left," she lied by way of

escaping. Stoick gave her a stern look.

"You'll do no one any good as it is. It's too late now - whoever's left is hunkered down and waiting for dawn tomorrow even though dawn was three hours ago."

"I have to try!" she said back, ignoring him and moving towards the oak.

"Lass," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder, and for a second, the hard, granite chief facade cracked along with his voice. "I can't let you go out there to look for him. It's too late to do that now."

"I know," she replied, and it was her turn for her voice to wobble. She shouldn't have been going through the foolish, useless, selfish act of clearing up half the room when she'd not even asked. She should have been out there, by the docks. Then she would have noticed the storm - she would have - on time, she would have known that he was in danger, she would have flown out there, caught up with him, brought him back before the worse of it hit Berk.

He'd be here in the Hall with her, worried sick about those departed dragons and lamenting Thor's timing to go out to play when he needed to get things done.

"I'm not going after him," she reiterated when Stoick did not seem about to balk. "But I, I have to go out there, I â€œ!" she gripped her half-finished pendant, almost as if it could replace her necklace as a tangible link to him. He was out there, being buffeted by the winds. How was she going to explain the irrational desire to face the wind with him, even if it was from miles away, or the illogical urge to pray, pray there, as if the prayer would reach the gods sooner or stronger if she was at her shrine instead of the Hall. "Please Stoick, I need to do this!"

"You're going to your shrine, lass?" Stoick asked gently, and she was taken aback, finding herself blushing at him knowing of something so private and intimate. "I followed you once. I was worried about you, and â€œ!" he shrugged, almost sheepishly. His mannerisms in that moment had so much of Hiccup in them that she thought she would cry. She bit her lip with all her strength until the pain made the lump blocking her nose and throat go away.

"I need to pray, Stoick," was all she could get out of her mouth, looking at him with all the earnestness she could muster between the choking panic rising in the pit of her belly and the terrible, throbbing echo of that all-encompassing feeling of her chest, brewing and boiling in her lower belly.

"Well, the gods seem to hear you, lass. That's kept him safe all these yearsâ€œ!" he grumbled, opening the door slightly before pausing. "But I know my boy by now - there's more in him than I thought; than anyone thought. He will survive this, and more so with your prayers, lass. But mind he does not come back to a Berk empty of you." The large, meaty hand hadn't left her shoulder yet, and he gripped it comfortingly. "He wouldn't survive that."

Astrid tried not to think of Hiccup not surviving. He always survived. She would cut her hair off and offer it to the gods if it

meant he survived.

"That spot of yours is facing south. The winds should be mild - but you're mostly surrounded by trees except for the ledge where the rocks are," he went on, and she blushed further at his obviously intimate knowledge of her praying spot. How often had he gone? Had he prayed himself? Her chest felt simultaneously warmer and jumbled. "So beware the lightning. Thor's certainly in that cloud today." Stoick suddenly gave a wry laugh. "Knowing my son, he may even have stopped to say hi. That boy could make friends with the Aesir and survive."

Astrid found the image frightful - she ducked out as soon as Stoick opened the door enough for Adderbite to pass. He stopped her at the last moment.

"Here!" he took off his fur cloak, curled its heaviness around her shoulders. "It's one of his." She didn't know if it was real or not with the strong winds swinging her body, but she caught the ghost of his scent coming from it. "Don't forget your promise!" he yelled after her as she moved on, his normally booming voice weak and reedy as the howling gales ate it up. Adderbite folded her wings against her body tightly, and followed her into the rain. It was freezing, her cheeks going numb in seconds, her exposed head getting soaked through until she pulled the cloak to cover it, but she didn't care. Adderbite could endure it because she was a nadder, and her fire was hotter than any other, and Astrid could endure it because she had to.

She could remember many times in her life when she'd been afraid. No, not only afraid. Terrified. Astrid had been utterly and completely terrified of dragons, the very sight of them sending a freezing coil up her spine. But she'd responded to it the same way she had been taught - like a Viking. Woman up, grab a weapon and fly at it. And if it hasn't killed you by the end, then you are a lucky one. You can live to be utterly terrified again next time.

And likewise, she was terrified now, albeit for completely different reason. Her Hiccup was out there, fighting this storm sent from Niflheim with Thor riding its winds. Night furies were being born tonight as Thor coupled with Hel in the furious embrace of ice and sleet.

She dashed towards their hall, barred up with the usual efficiency of routine, and then she raced past it, her breath coming short from the cold rather than the effort, and into the tree-line. They offered some shelter, but not much, as they swayed about like tormented servants of the Lady of the Underworld, the wind giving them the voices of those she tricked and tortured.

This terrified was completely different. Even with Adderbite beside her, she was alone out here against the jostling, battling gods. And even more, even more, her Hiccup was alone out there, between skies of thunder and deadly churning seas, and this time she was really terrified. She was afraid like she'd never been in her life.

By the time she arrived at the shrine, her fur cloak was slightly damp. Stoick had been right, and the shrine was drenched, the various figures of Mjolnir clicking insistently against the rocks at

intermittent intensity as the wind came and went. Even though the wind was not directly facing them, the ledge was high up enough not to have any shelter, and her step almost faltered when she stepped out of the tree's protection. Adderbite kept her up with a nose, but then sat down, fearing her great bulk would drive her over the stone's edge. The dragon couldn't fly with these winds, and she didn't fit on the small ledge that the rock shrine was on anyway. Astrid crawled to it on hand and knee, grabbing one of the stones in hand to steady herself, her other hand grasping at the carving hanging from her neck.

The sea crashed deafeningly just below her, the howls of the wind swaying the tree tops so much more clearly now that she could see them from the outside. Even seated, with all her body weight and progressively wetter pelt holding her down, she still felt the cold hands of the gale pushing her, as if seeing if they could test her purchase on the cliff and tip her over. The sea was looking like a violent cauldron, dashing against the rocks and foaming at the mouth, waiting to devour anything. The air was foggy with the rain, the visibility murky and sodden.

She felt a new sort of terror when she imagined being on dragon-back in the middle of this. On a dragon with the wingspan that Toothless had.

"Oh great Odin's ghost," she whimpered, resting against the wet rocks of her shrine mound, pressing the fist containing the pendant between the rocks and her belly churning worse than the sea. "Oh Great Mother. Oh Freya, please, please," she begged, not sure what she was praying for anymore. She wanted so, so many things. To keep him alive, to keep him safe and sound, to save him from injury and pain. She wanted to beg the gods to bring him back to her, right in that moment, to miraculously make a black speck appear on the horizon that would grow larger and larger, until it was him and Toothless, somehow safely back.

The rain beat heavily on the ground around her and her pelt covering, daggers of water beginning to penetrate the bear fur as it saturated, and soaking into her clothes. She couldn't care less as she realised how hopeless it was for a man and a dragon, no matter which man and dragon, caught far out of Berk and upon open seas in this maelstrom of destruction. The sea took over her belly, the waves of emotion hitting the rocks of rational certainty in her body, knowing that there was no way he could survive this, and underneath the pelt, with the wind still trying to grab her knees and ankles, her tears joined the raindrops as she sobbed into her shrine, her thoughts jumbled up until her prayers were only a flood of emotion she directed towards the gods.

She flinched when Adderbite warbled, and turned around expecting something horrible to have happened, only to see her dragon shooting a stream of fire onto the ground around her, forming a circle in the wet grass that ignited only because it was nadder fire. Astrid suddenly could feel her toes again, when she had not realised they had become numb, and she began shuddering insistently. Adderbite looked at her sternly, then spewed another stream of fire right in front of her clawed feet and opened her wing.

"Adderbite," she begged, her voice barely carrying past her mouth. Her hands grasped the shrine, barely feeling the stone under her

palm, as if letting the stones go meant letting go of Hiccup's hand as he drowned. "I can't!"

The dragon gave an angry growl and fluttered her one extended wing more insistently. Everything inside Astrid said that she should move, that she was going to freeze to death if she didn't get beside the dragon. The warmth from the flames Adderbite had put around her was already dying, and Astrid's toes were once again fading from existence.

Hiccup wouldn't want to come back to a one-legged, no-toed wife, perhaps?

But even as she tried to crawl away, her palm wouldn't leave the rocks. For some reason, the feeling that if she left that rock, if her palm lifted from the slick stone surface, all would be lost, was so very strong.

Adderbite finally solved her dilemma as she grabbed Astrid in her mouth, her teeth almost digging into skin as she tugged her back and then dumped her under her wing. Astrid's cloak came open, the little warmth still trapped there escaping, and her beautiful Brisvinga popped out of its holster with the strength of her landing.

The moment the axe skidded away, Astrid was scrambling for it. She grabbed its hilt, planting it into the earth to help herself stand in the gale, but Adderbite jolted her back and tucked her into her body.

Lightning hit Brisvinga, the light dancing in thin, silver-like fingers across the surface as if it were caressing the beautiful axe. The beam of burning light travelled up and down the axe and metal-covered handle, into the scorching earth, and then exited in two beams on either side, hitting a tree on the right and the rain and air on the left.

The tree gave an alarming groan. Adderbite squaked in warning, curling her wing with Astrid underneath as the tree began tilting this way and that on unsteadily buried roots, the wind driving it to oscillate like a giant tottering in its step, an ice-giant just felled by Thor where it stood.

There was a crack first, a deafening one that echoed even above the howls of the storm. Then there was a series of much smaller cracks and crocks, but then, finally, there was a massive break, sounding almost like a report of thunder, a last imprecation of the ice-giant cursing Thor into the mouth of Jormungandr.

Then it tilted, slowly at first, as if it was just someone leaning on a door jamb, or a ledge, with clods of earth rising like bile from a monster's stomach as the roots came away in tendrils. Then quickly, quickly, coming down like a shot - like a night fury, with a massive din of more cracks and snaps that the wind carried about like so many pieces of the tree, leaves and branches and splinters the size of her arms splitting off as it hit other trees on the way down.

A scream of fear tore itself out of Astrid as she watched it coming down, seemingly directly on top of them. Adderbite was curled around her, but Astrid could not move her eyes away, nor could she make her body run or drag her dragon with her. The tree branches flailed as it

careened towards the ground, and then Astrid screamed because it seemed to be headed, dead center, towards her shrine.

"No! No, hit me!" she screamed at it as she pushed herself standing, as if she could change its course with her voice. The tree hit the ground with a noise that made her ears ring, and Adderbite dragged her back even though she was trying to move forward. Branches were obscuring everything as they bounced with the impact, and then the trunk itself rebounded, pulling the branches up behind it and then under it as it rolled. Astrid watched, open mouthed, as it bounced right over her shrine as if it were by design, and landed once again right behind it. The rain-soft ground gave, and for a terrifying moment Astrid thought the tree was going to take the ledge with it, shrine and all. But it was, miraculously, still attached to the soil by some roots. It stuck fast, branches and leaves, twisted and mostly burned getting caught between the torque of the flat ground and the slightly higher ledge it had been wedged under.

The howling gale seemed to be silent in comparison to the incredible noise and impact the falling tree had made. The storm still screamed on, creating chaos and havoc. The branches of the fallen tree waved to and fro, seeming about to be ripped at any moment, but it held.

Her shrine now had a crown of twisted branches and leaves behind it when before it used to jut out into the sea. They waved about, as if to complement the noise of clicking wooden Mjolnir figures tied to the shrine. Brisinga was still embedded into the charred soil, standing erect right in front of the rocks and tree.

Astrid let herself sit down slowly as she looked at it, Adderbite sheltering her and preening at her worriedly. Her shrine had been â€œ saved.

"The gods â€œ the gods be praised," she said in a voice she almost didn't recognise through the layer of tear-rasp and screamed fear. Trembling terribly, her body quaking beyond her control, Astrid let Adderbite gather her up against her warm belly, shooting fire at a relatively drier patch of earth, creating a cocoon under her wing. The bear skin - one of his - was soaking, but still somehow provided enough warmth when Adderbite held her wing over it. And Astrid just let herself laugh, putting her head under her dragon's wing joint as the wind continued, the rain never stopped pouring, but Brisinga kept smoking as if it were incense to evoke the gods' mercy, and now her shrine had a tree protecting it.

"Please, Frigga, Freya, please," she murmured, holding tightly onto her pendant. "You know what it is to lose a husband. Don't let him suffer like Oddr and Odin. Please. Bring him home."

Adderbite curled around her more tightly; the storm raged on; but Astrid never moved, not until Stoick came for her himself, lifting her up and taking her to the Hall, where she only half-remembered the hot ale and warm compresses on her hands and feet.

The gods had protected her shrine. Thor himself had given it a cradle, like a nest to keep it safe. It had to be a sign, it had to be. She fell asleep clutching her - his - pendant, ignoring all the cries and protestations around her to stay awake.

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When he awoke, the storm was still raging. The winds rattled the wooden walls around him, jolting him awake with a snort and blinking eyes. The comfortable warmth of his pelt covers was disrupted by the jarring cold of the air inside the hut, and he realised the fire had gone out. Using some of the burned oils at the bottom of his skillet, which had somewhat solidified in the near-frigid temperatures, he helped the flame back up, throwing in more kindling and watching the fledgling fire take life again. The room smelt mustier than yesterday, whatever mold had taken hold of the chair burned and became part of the room's closed up stillness.

Thunder and lightning continued to roar and rumble outside, Thor apparently deciding to take a good long vacation with a brawl-party. Those poor ice-giants were getting their arses wiped, with all the pieces of them falling from the sky in snow and sleet.

"Hey, bud," he mumbled, rubbing his still sleep-blurry eyes. Toothless gave a snorty moan and blinked one eye open. The pink tongue sneaked out, licking at his nose, then giving Hiccup's hand a swipe. "Eck, thanks for that."

He looked around the room, trying to remember things above his tired, muzzy brain. He was in his home. Had he really been to Berk? Was he really welcome back there, liked - except for a few glares here and there for the thing with Astrid - and engaged to Astrid.

No, no that was so stupid. It had been a dreamâ€!

But then his leg gave a twinge. He uncovered it, and the missing bits weren't there. So it's all true, it's all really happening. He has people back on Berk waiting for him.

He has her back on Berk, waiting.

He had no idea how much time had passed; it could be the same day, the following night, or the following morning. Hiccup swallowed thickly, his insides suddenly resembling the storm outside as he remembered everything else that had happened in the past weeks. He couldn't even go back if he wanted to. He was supposed to go after the dragons. He had the whole of the archipelago waiting for news. He was trapped here, and he had all those eyes, looking for him expectantly. With worry, and hope, and maybe a bit of anger, and â€œgya!

He threw the covers off him, huffing a little as his breath became short and his blood rose to beat in his ears. He latched his leg on and rose, then paced along the tiny hut, feeling like those times when he'd gotten cabin fever before. Toothless eyed him worriedly.

"What should I do?" he asked the dragon, pacing around and running his hands through his hair, ignoring the pain in his stump. "What's the right thing to do? I'm still me, I'm still Hiccup the idiot. Look what I did now; got us stuck here when we're on a schedule, because I just had to go do loops in the sky with you." Toothless gave him a whine. "And you! I've been treating you so badly, sharing so little time with you! You've been beside me through â€œ through everything!"

He slumped onto a stool, huffing in agitation and rubbing his forehead against the heel of his hand.

"Maybe I had it right before. Maybe I should just disappear," he whispered to himself. Toothless gave a garbled growl, almost eloquent in his dissonance and disapproval. "What? What should I do? I can't keep this up much longer. I'm going nuts, and it's only been a few weeks. How am I supposed to do it all my life!" He stood up again, pacing, too restless to stay put. "Now I should just- settle down to it. Be happy about it, even! Be a dad and a husband when I don't know the first thing about either of them! Be a chief when I can't even get my own goddamn life in order! The first chance I got, I broke Astrid's heart and shat on her honour in front of all the tribes!" He kicked the stool, then he hissed and hopped around, holding his stump as it throbbed viciously. Toothless tripped him up with this tail, catching him and holding him down to his belly even as Hiccup struggled futilely to get away. "Right," he finished with a pant. "I can't even take care of my own damn body anymore, it seems."

He sighed, finally, relaxing back into Toothless' embrace as the dragon crooned comfortingly.

"I'm an idiot. I lost my temper, I'm sorry," he sighed. Toothless licked the side of his face in punishment and Hiccup just took it with a smile, wiping the drool off gamely. "You really are the best, you know, bud? I'd be really lost without you." He leaned his head back, looking at his hut's ceiling dispassionately. The wind continued to howl outside like a hungry wolf, waiting to take the next life away in its cold, dead hands.

He rolled over and sat up, turning to retrieve his saddle-bag and take stock of his provisions. The wind already sounded marginally less powerful, but he was not going to pretend that the weather this time of year was not whimsical and changeable. His own pack was good for a few days between hard biscuits and bread with preserved meat and fish. Toothless would have to share with him, but they'd eventually run out. At most, they had till tomorrow night, at which point they either dared to venture out or -

He remembered Astrid's pack, then. Almost feeling like he should wince from using it, because of his shifty and treacherous thoughts a few moments ago, he was forced to admit that he needed to know how much food they had. It could mean the difference between life and starvation.

He was hit with a memory, then. This hut had not yet existed in its final form - it had been an abandoned hunting lodge he'd just shacked up in that first year. There hadn't been time to do much save stopper up the leaks before the rains and snow came. Then they'd been stuck inside, with nearly nothing to eat.

Nothing, for however long he lived, would taste as good as those rabbits Toothless had risked his life to capture for them, out in the snow. Even with his abysmal cooking skills, they had been the difference between life and death, and nothing would ever â€|

Well, no, he was lying. There was Astrid's cured meat, and her fish soup. That fish soup of hers was so incredible, rich and salty in just the right quantities that his mouth watered just thinking about

it.

He unlatched Astrid's pack from the saddle, opening it almost reverently. This wasn't even something she'd packed for him, this was hers, something she'd prepared for herself. Something she kept on standby that told the story of everything she thought was vital and necessary. He almost felt like a snoop, going through it like this; a large part of him was just as curious about the non-vital parts of the pack as much as the food.

There were two sleeping linens at the top, which he left folded and carefully put down on the cleanest part of the surrounding area, which happened to be Toothless' flank. He nosed the clothes, giving them a sniff and a warble when he recognised their smell.

"Yeah, this is hers," he whispered back, his voice low for reasons beyond his knowledge. There were some bandage rolls next, general ointments and salves. Next came the food, and he was pleased to see that with these provisions added to his own, he'd be able to last out the storm for four days without being able to fish. He took out the food, adding it to his own, and then putting together the few supplies he'd scrounged from the hut.

He blushed when he looked at what came next - breast wraps and loin linen, which he piled on top of the sleeping clothes with scalded palms, trying very hard not to look suspicious to Toothless, who wasn't buying it.

"She puts those around her!" Hiccup just waved at his chest area and Toothless gave him a jeering smile. Ack, dirty-minded dragon... There were socks, leather thongs for her hair, a comb, a few toolsâ€|

At the very bottom, as if it were the thing placed first into the bag and taken everywhere, nearly forgotten about but not quite in its well kept condition, was a straw doll, almost like the one he'd made for Åtta a few weeks ago. This one wasn't as well woven, and time had worn it thin and fraying. But it almost looked like it had been oiled and varnished, as if to preserve it as long as possible. A part of it was still frayed beyond repair, and it had been tied together with a piece of knotted parchment.

He'd made this doll for her when they were children. The parchment used to knot the hole was his letter. Astrid carried both of them around with her whenever she left Berk. She hadn't had time to prepare this, not with as quickly as she'd gone in and out, and this little gem had been at the bottom anyway. He'd never had discovered it unless he were snooping.

His stomach plummeted as he thought of what he'd just been planning, what he'd really meant to do. And it was a plan that would work, too. He knew it would work, saw it stretched in front of him like a flat and open path, one he'd travelled before and could travel again.

The road leading back to Berk on the other hand seemed tortuous and winding, uphill and steep. The storm outside made a perfect backdrop for his many doubts and difficulties, and there was just not enough inside him to live up to them all.

But this doll â€| his history was there. His roots and his origin

were there. And Astrid was there. And little Åttta too; that little rascal had burrowed her way into his chest and sat there. She owned him already.

He gathered his food, taking it toward the table he used for it to make sure they didn't trample it by mistake. The firelight cast a glow on the whole small interior, and as he put the things down, doll still in hand as he couldn't bring himself to put it down, his eyes caught sight of his old alter.

And he suddenly shuddered, feeling like a drop of freezing rain had somehow found its way through the roof board and slithered down his spine.

The road of the life he'd lived was flat and wide because it was bland. It seemed easy and straightforward because it was empty.

He remembered the feelings he used to have, praying fervently in front of that altar, to Lofn, to Freya, to the Good Mother Frigga. For love, for relief of his loneliness. For sweet smelling blonde hair and shining smiles framed by freckles.

His heart began to hammer as he realised what he'd almost contemplated, what he'd nearly done. The sky and the sea hadn't meant this sort of freedom to him - not always. They'd meant escape from the emptiness inside this hut, and inside his chest, an emptiness Toothless had not been able to plug completely. In the last few frantic months, in his really unexpected and painful return to Berk, all the feelings jumbled up and roiling in his chest had nearly eclipsed what he'd felt for years.

It had been a loneliness verging on desperation, one he'd quailed with friends and frequent visits as often as he could get away with it. Long voyages and wide travel had filled in the long Summer days when there simply was nothing else to do, nothing else of value tying him to one place or the other.

He hadn't been living; he'd been existing, waking up and breathing until he slept the next night.

"I'm a fool," he sighed to himself, running a hand on the altar. Toothless gave a sleepy groan, as if to say 'you realised only now?' and Hiccup sniggered at himself, moving towards the shelves lining the wall still containing a few nicknacks and possessions.

He spotted one he no longer needed right away. It was a leather mask with intricate design, one he had been given where he'd also gotten the trap box. You were supposed to wear it and go into a house of pleasure, so no one would know you.

He'd never gone, not really sure what he'd do with himself in a house of pleasure. Now, he'd never dream of going, not when he had someone so beautiful to be faithful to.

Another item jumped to his hand as he rifled through the shelves. It was an old knife, given to him by an old woman. She'd told him that as long as he held onto it, he would be able to attract woman. He'd bought it out of pity, but then some strange, childish hope had prevented him from throwing it out. He hadn't touched it in years, and yet Astrid seemed to have had no problem finding him agreeable in

that hut.

A few more things found their way into his hand - a necklace he'd been given in exchange for goods which had come with a promise of something more if he stuck around; a woven bead bracelet he'd bought for Sepha and never given her, because she'd met her fisherman sweetheart before Hiccup could put to words the things he hoped they could have, even if they stemmed from feelings born of all the wrong reasons; a reed collar for a slave girl he'd won in a card game, and who he'd taken back home, much to her astonishment. She had been another who had offered an empty night of passion in her bed, a sort of currency of reward, rather than the warmth and care he'd always, perennially been looking for.

He'd kept these as sort of 'conquests', as reminders that he wasn't as unwanted as all that after all. They'd been little shadows of the dotted, fleeting human contacts he'd had while he searched for the solidity he'd lost.

He didn't need them anymore. Not when he had Home to return to. Not when he had Astrid, waiting there with willing, open arms. The tortuous road was the only thing that made sense. It was steep, and uphill, because otherwise it wouldn't be worthwhile. Nothing empty could ever be fulfilling.

So he moved to the fire, throwing the things that meant his empty loneliness and bachelorhood into it one after the other, thanking the gods for his chance with their offering, watching them flare up and curl in on themselves, as if feeling the pain of their demise while he got rid of the last vestiges of the last five years still clinging to him like shadows with claws.

As soon as Sepha's bracelet met the flames, his chest felt lighter. His fear of telling Astrid about her was still there, but somehow now it seemed worth it to put his heart that far on the line. He'd always known that Astrid was worth all of Midgard and the Moon besides, but in the haze of so much else, he'd sort of forgotten it.

And he'd court her. Properly. Do all the things he'd wanted to do with her, for her. He had a lifetime to make up for his mistakes.

"Well, bud," he said with a laugh as Toothless looked at him with some satisfaction. "Five years make good kindling, at least."

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Brunhilda put down the hot compress, a sigh escaping her lips as Silent Sven nodded a thanks. She and the Goethi had been doing the rounds of all those who had been injured, either with debris or with the cold. Sven was the last one of a long line, his poor bald head suffering mild frostbite by the time he'd reached the hall.

She gave a sigh of relief when Sven moved away, sitting back against a column and looking over at the Goethi, who was packing her things and looking around forlornly at the high stools and sighing, no doubt missing the terrors that by now carted her everywhere. Out of all her pack, only three very young ones had been left behind, and they were too small to do anything but snooze by the large fires, half the size

of an already tiny dragon.

"I'm going!" Brunhilda nodded towards the back of the hall, and the Goethi waved her off, giving her hand a pat. The Hofferson matriarch quickly gathered her own supplies and made her way towards a quieter, darker corner, where the crowds of people had been shooed away to make space for her.

Astrid was lying down on a make-shift bed of sand-sacks covered in a few blankets, with coal pans and skins filled with boiling water packed around her. When Stoick had brought her in, Brunhilda had felt her blood rush down to her toes and through to Niflheim, her little girl already half-frozen and half-dead. The ice-giants had nearly gotten her, as they had no doubt devoured her future husband out there.

Her poor child, a widow before she was even a wife.

"How is she?" she asked Droplaug, who had gathered a bevy of women around her. Droplaug shook her head sadly, and Brunhilda quickly sat down.

"Her fever broke, but she's not woken yet, and she seems trapped in nightmares," the Ingermann matriarch sighed. Brunhilda bit her lip to try to keep the tears in, and Sigga patted her shoulder.

"She'll pull through," Sigga said roughly. "And that boy's lived out there for years. He knows a bad cloud when he sees one. He must have found shelter."

All the people assembled around Astrid's bed looked at each other, some seeming to take courage from Sigga's words. Brunhilda herself let herself hope a little; it was true, Hiccup wasn't little Hiccup anymore. He had survived five Winters on his own - that was the test of any man.

"Hiccup!" Astrid sighed, frowning as she turned her head and grabbed the sheets. Blood blossomed on the bandages around her fingers and Droplaug sighed. Ruffnut swore under her breath.

"Damn Astrid, always being so stubborn, even when you sleep!" the young girl hissed at her as if she could hear her while she cradled her child. The elder women pat her back, understanding her upset, as Brunhilda simply took out more medicating supplies, replacing the ointment and bandages, and then turning her daughter's head slightly to take care of her ear and face.

A flower - a snowdrop - had been frozen stuck to her ear and face, impossible to remove until they'd thawed it and leaving behind the most frightful frostbite Brunhilda had ever seen. Astrid would be forever marked with it, three petals of a snowdrop seared into the side of her face as if with fire, her left ear mottled with its leaves. It would remain a white scar for the rest of her life. Her fingers were marginally better - all of them were red and slightly swollen, but she'd lost the nail on that tiny one, the skin beginning to blacken slightly around the contours where the nail used to be. It was lucky that Stoick had found her when he did - she may have lost more than a nail if he hadn't.

"She's never done anything by halves," Ruffnut lamented. "Even when

we were knee-high. Now's she's gone and earned her name even more. Idiot." She frowned, poking her shoulder as if it could wake her. "You didn't need to do all that, you were already all 'loyal' ages ago."

"Let's hope she's not loyal enough to follow him into Helheim," Glunda sighed melodramatically, and Sigga bristled at her. The old woman from Freezing had been getting on everyone's nerves, attaching herself to the leading women of Berk with the excuse of being with Heather and doing her best to make everyone detest her. She'd spoken ill of their age-tested laundry methods, insulted their child-rearing abilities and belittled their medical knowledge all within the first hour of being in the Hall.

"Lad's not dead yet," Sigga hissed, folding her arms. Brunhilda was grateful for it, because she didn't have the energy to defend her son-in-law right now. "Neither is she. My Snotlout could survive this storm in a rowing boat. Hiccup will too; he's made of Berk Stock.'

"Oh, let us hope so," Glunda replied, and Spitelout appeared just on time to hold his wife back when she appeared about to give the old hag a black eye to improve her looks.

"Stoick sent me for news," he asked Brunhilda, struggling to keep his spirited wife from going after the old woman.

"Fever's broken, but not much else," she sighed in reply. Spitelout nodded, his face settling into grim lines. "She should wake up, and she's lucky she only lost the nail of her smaller finger. The frostbite could have taken the rest of her with it if it liked the taste of it."

"She'll pull through. She's a strong one." Spitelout nodded, letting his wife go with a look before moving back towards Stoick, huddled as he was around one of the tables that he and the other chiefs had commandeered.

"Now, in the absence of Astrid, I'll take on the role as second; anyone protest?" Brunhilda said, looking around at the gathered women. Phlegma was not there, as she was at Stoick's table, but the majority of the squad leaders nodded, and that was enough.

"What do you mean?" Glunda asked shrewdly in her high, screechy voice. Droplaug gave her a severe glare; the Ingermann matriarch was one of sweetest, most even-tempered women that Brunhilda knew. She was assigned to guarding and herding the women to the safe route because she was the best at keeping them calm, and even the Thorston twin had started to learn a few good behaviours under her quiet and benign tutelage - but Glunda, apparently was her limit of supportation. Good; she wouldn't protest what she was going to do next.

"My first act is to warn you, Glunda Humperdink, that if you do not shut your mouth, I will do it for you, permanently." Brunhilda gave her the best dragon frown she owned. "There will be a tragic accident where the door of the Hall will open and close, and you will be on the other side of it in the freeze by the time the bolt's back in place. Do I make myself clear"?

Droplaug only kept glaring. Heather's face was carefully neutral. Ruffnut and Sigga were looking like Snoggletog had come four days early.

"Why the outrage, what gives you the authority to-"

"I do." Brunhilda stood up, instantly at her daughter's side. Astrid waved her away, almost immediately back to herself once she blinked awake. Even through the heavy eyelids, her eyes were sharp. All the women around the bed quickly helped her as she tried to sit up, but she shrugged it off too, sitting under her own steam. As soon as she was upright, she nailed Glunda with a look. "I'm the only woman in the Haddock household. She is my second because she was Hiccup's mother's second. Now let me make myself clear." She got off the makeshift bed, her legs supporting her well enough. "This is a time of worry and crises. In a time like this, all women on this island answer to me. It is the rule on Berk." A dagger came out, the point flirting with the old woman's chin. "I don't care what clan or tribe you belong to; once it's crisis time, crisis rules apply to everyone. Make one single problem, and I put you in a cell with the UglyThug traitors, and tell them you were the one who ratted them out."

Glunda opened and closed her mouth like a fish.

"You've been told to shut up. So shut up. Now."

Her mouth closed, and didn't open again.

"Good. Now, everyone tell me what I've missed." She looked around the women, half hopeful. "He hasn't come back, has he?"

"No," Brunhilda replied, sadly. Astrid nodded, looking down. She gave her bandaged finger a dismayed look.

"How much of it did I lose?" she asked.

"Just the nailâ€|"

"Perfect," she replied. "It won't stop me from holding an axe. Now I have to go speak with Stoick. He's bound to have had someone peek outside to see how the storm's brewing. I'll bring back news."

Brunhilda watched her daughter leave with barely a wobble in her step. She'd just been feverish for two hours, she should be in bed, drinking some hot soup. They'd warmed her as thoroughly as they could and she'd still almost died of the cold, but she was as stubborn as her father, that girl.

"I'm going to find Hacknee," she huffed to the other women. "He needs to get his daughter under control."

"Good luck with that," Sigga replied. "Even Hiccup can't, and she's wrapped around his little finger."

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**Well then, if it isn't me writing an idiot, and me writing the most hard-headed woman in the history of humankind. I love these two,

really I do. They are such a vibrant, dynamic characters. I hope Astrid doesn't turn into 'the chick' in HTTYD 2, because I will scream.**

Astrid is suffering from light strains of hypothermia here, despite having a dragon with her. The signs are hidden within the narration. For instance, she is feeling the rock against her palm rather than her fingers.

20. Healed

Be warned: This chapter is an emotional whiplash. There is sweet cuteness and then torture. I have tagged the scene, to be safe.

Also I realised that I'm a noob and I missed chapter 12, so I went back and straightened everything out.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 18 - Healed_

**The soul is healed by being with children.**

• _**Fyodor Dostoyevsky**_

Hiccup clung on tightly to the saddle, the wind rushing by in his ears even with the helmet on at the extraordinary speed they were going. As it turned out, Hiccup and Toothless had been confined to their old hut for only a day - they'd left in the wee hours of the morning yesterday and probably landed on their old island way before the midday hour had even begun to creep in. By the time the winds and snow had abated enough to stick their nose outside and see whether they were snowed in, it had been night-time.

The dawn bloomed pink and mellow, as if the weather wasn't responsible for the destruction of the day before. The snow had been mixed with rain for too much of the storm to be more than slush and ice, so at least they hadn't been stuck inside the hut, but Hiccup had despaired at being able to follow the dragons.

"_You've lost the trail haven't you, bud?"_

Toothless gave him an eloquent look, narrower irises as he nodded towards his saddle.

" a| _you don't a| need a trail, do you?"_

It made sense, really, and he should have thought of it before. All the clues began to fall into place - the dragons' restlessness, the sea-dragons' migrations, Clover and Stormfly, Fireworm and Hoark's nightmare a| it was beginning to form a picture in his mind. And of course, Toothless wouldn't be immune to it.

"Are we almost there, bud?" he said quietly. Toothless gave a growl, perhaps more violent than his usual answers, but still recognisable. Hiccup didn't dare pat his flank - if he was right, Hiccup was lucky that Toothless hadn't thrown him off. But his battle-brother recognised him even now, when he was focussed on one thing alone.

Powerful wing-beats ate up the miles faster than usual, the sea a blur underneath them faster than even Hiccup was used to. There was a sense of urgency in Toothless that Hiccup was feeling by proxy, so very few words were exchanged between them, the human doing his best to keep up with his dragon as they flipped and turned and sped ahead like a bat out of Hel's realm.

It wasn't three more minutes before the clouds parted. They'd been through Helheim's gate, across the ruins of Dragon Island, and out the other side. But now, the clear blue skies were becoming dotted with more and more dragons of every shape, colour and size. Hiccup looked around in amazement at the different species, some of which he'd never even seen, and almost sat up in his saddle before Toothless gave an impatient growl.

"Sorry bud, on it," he said, changing gear; Toothless's body rippled, and suddenly they were going at breakneck speed. If he thought they were going fast before, he'd been wrong. They twirled in the sky, rose, fell, rose again; Toothless began giving roars the likes of which Hiccup had never heard. Hiccup's theory was more than confirmed when in the clouds around them, shapes of familiar wings began to glide upwards towards them in the cotton white haze.

"Bud, put me down, I'll engage your emergency fin," he whispered in Toothless' ear. "Like that, the girls won't see me and get spooked." Toothless' eyes were almost as narrow as they would go, but there was still a spark of love in there among the instinct that made him look up at his human, then snort and nod.

Without warning, Toothless threw himself into a nose dive. The other dragons followed, and Hiccup could only pray that they didn't find him a tasty meal; he was assuming they were all night furies, but he'd never even seen another one, and he had no idea whether dragons liked to mix species - it's not like he and Toothless ever had a long and involved conversation about his taste in scaly ladies.

They landed with a jarring thump, and his dragon gave a shake and a muted roar of impatience.

"Alright, bud, keep your scales on!" he said, feeding off Toothless' nervousness and excitement as he fixed the foot-gear in place and then hitched all the proper levers and wrenches. Hiccup barely had time to unhook his leg and get off the saddle before Toothless was rearing up and letting out an ear-splitting roar again.

Three black dashes landed around them, three heads rising with cocked, twitching wings. Hiccup backed away slowly, careful not to fall over when at the same time he was rather mesmerised by the sight; three other night furies. He'd never seen this many together; they didn't look pleased to be this close to one another, either.

Toothless roared again, spreading his wings but not taking off yet. He pulled them backwards, showing off his chest and wingspan, slapping his tail and growling at them. One of them, obviously seeing too much competition, ducked her head and flew off. The other two dragons came closer cautiously. Hiccup hid behind a rock and looked on.

"Whoa, bud," he whispered with a smirk. "Two girls at once; who's the lady killer? You are! Go get 'em!"

The two females approached his dragon, Toothless not moving an inch from his pose; wings cocked back, chest stretched forward, eyes half-lidded in a near-disinterested look as both females sniffed him insistently. One of them with ice-blue eyes began to rub against his wing, licking his dorsal fins and pushing her neck against his; Toothless didn't react immediately, though his tail stopped slapping the ground.

The other female didn't much seem to like the advances and attacked the first one. They went down in a tumble of wings and fins, circling one another, barking and uncovering their teeth as they wanted to bite each others' throat out. Scales flew everywhere as they went for each other's necks, and Toothless just sat down, looking on. After a while, when a few scars had been given, he gave a growl and both females froze, looking at him, before he blasted at the second girl. The female with blue eyes instantly crooned at the other one in what could be nothing but glee, and she loped up to Toothless, purring and rubbing against his chin.

Hiccup turned away when they began to lick each other insistently, crawling into the sparse foliage around on hands and knees; he really didn't want to see this. He and Toothless were close, but certainly not this close.

Huh, Toothless the lady-killer. Two girls fighting for the right to get humped by his bud; Hiccup felt a surge of misplaced pride as he navigated the rocky terrain to try to stay out of his best friend's way. He got back up onto his feet when he judged he was far enough away - Erk, nope, nope, not far enough!

He walked away double-time as he caught site of the - er - proceedings from the tail of his eye. The roaring was telltale enough.

So he focussed on the rest of the island, trying to find his bearings. Years of flying all over the place had given him a good sense of distance and space; they'd flown East of the Dragon Isle for a good five hours, so they were not more than a day off from Berk. The shape of the island and the gritty, black rock told him it had probably been formed by a submerged volcano - a fact confirmed by the yellow, sulfuric beach and steaming pools of water pocketing the entire land-mass. There was little to no vegetation - the reedy plants he'd first scarpered into seeming to be the only plant able to survive the craggy rocks and toxic, sulfuric air.

And almost every inch of it was dotted in dragons of all shapes and sizes.

This island seemed one of many, too. He walked about, seeming to

cause the many dragon pairs milling around none-too-much worry; he probably smelled too much like Toothless to give alarm. Some pairs were roosting, others were still in the process of fighting for their mates. Others still were returning from the sea, regurgitating food into a roosting partner's mouth. Some were feeding a rock-nest of newly hatched younglings, most of them with their eyes still sealed.

It made the whole spit-the-fish-back-at-you thing Toothless had done for him the first time seem sort of .. weird. It made him snort at the face his dragon would make if Hiccup asked whether he'd just thought the human was scrawny when they'd met, or whether he should call him 'dad'.

Oh, boy, dear god-father Odin - he was going to call Toothless dad. For different reasons.

Babies. The dragons came here to have babies.

He sat down on a rock as he huffed a laugh to himself. He couldn't help the wide grin that spread across his face as he thought of all the little ones coming back to Berk - oh, they'd have one for Spit now. And also for all the new recruits who were going to alight on Berk next Spring. They'd probably be old enough to pair off by Spring too, great timing for the training to begin. So many eager young dragons, meeting children for the first times, bonding, tumbling, playing and learning together.

Ah, he almost regretted giving Ätta that terror now, but there was no reason why she couldn't keep Hiss and chose herself another little one - one who would grow big enough to carry her, some day. A nadder, perhaps. Yes; certainly a nadder, just like her moth- er, aunt.

Another laugh escaped Hiccup as he ran a hand down his face. "Ok, Frigga, I give up," he called out towards Asgard, cottony clouds seeming to laugh at him as the sun winked in and out of sight. "No need to pile it on this high!"

A couple of dragons beside him grumbled at him for being so loud, and he just gave a chuckling apology and sat down lower, on the rocky sand and sprawled backwards onto the warmth of it. He smirked up at the sky, and something bumped into him from the side, biting into his harness and pulling ineffectually. Apparently, some of these little tykes were already mobile.

Babies, family. He was surrounded by dozens of dragon families, all with new little ones to take care of. They'd come here almost without having a choice, following an instinct-driven compass to ensure the new generation. And somehow â€œ he got the feeling this hadn't happened in a long time. He wasn't sure if the Red Death had anything to do with it, but all these dragons seemed almost frantic to find each other here again.

Nadders in the deep North didn't migrate to mate. They stayed together, and he'd seen nests and hatchlings during the summer. It also seemed such a strange time to have hatchlings; the middle of Winter. Maybe the Red Death had disrupted the breeding cycle. But it was all speculation. He'd speak to Fishlegs about it later, and they would compare notes. Boy would he be happy when they

returnedâ€|

The growling and tugging at his side became more insistent, and he raised a head to look at the little marauder who was trying to drag him away as a conquest. It was a baby nightmare, a multitude of gem colours on its skin, vibrant red flushing up its legs and flanks. As soon as it noticed Hiccup's attention, it gave out an excited thrill and hopped about, flapping and falling over in that ungainly, baby way of moving around that tore an endeared noise out of Hiccup's mouth.

Boy he was glad these didn't hatch on Berk. He'd never be able to live it down, cooing at dragon babies.

"You're going to rip that," he told the baby nightmare mildly. "And then I'll be mad. You won't like me when I'm mad." The baby puffed out its chest and tried to blow fire, a puff of smoke exiting its mouth and making it cough. Hiccup chuckled, much to the hatchling's offense. "That's how you want it, aye? Then here I come!"

The hatchling took off with an excited chirp as Hiccup took his time to stand - damned blistered stump, hurting like Helheim's teeth! - and then lumber after the little one in mock menace. A pack of tiny nadders, light on their feet already with their stubby little horns and big eyes, joined the fun, and quickly he was chasing around a tiny flock of baby dragons, all squeaking and tumbling and tugging at his boot when he didn't pay them attention for too long. The sun was setting by the time he fell onto his arse, panting laughter with exhaustion. The hatchlings gathered around him as if he was about to spew food for them.

"Sorry, you guys, I don't do the vomiting thing. It wouldn't taste as good as your mum's with all that acid, that's for sure." One of the babies began to butt his shoulder - a small gronkle, though small was relative - and another began whining and worrying at his chin. Hiccup rose with a sigh. "Let's go look for your mums, yeah?" he said, and the nadder baby ducked its head into his neck, biting at - "No!" he said, startling it, and it cackled in worried protest. He pat it on the head, but quickly fingered Astrid's pendant to make sure it was alright. Thankfully, baby nadder jaws didn't seem strong enough to bend Gobber's work.

Belatedly, with a sinking feeling, he realised that he had a promise to keep to someone important back home. Two promises, and he'd almost broken the one where he'd always been there fore her, while the other one to be there before Snoggletog may be sitting on the cliff. Still, he couldn't exactly hop onto Toothless and head back, not when he was â€| busy. Ack, no thinking about it. How did Toothless do it, give a damn and actually giving him this self-satisfied leer whenever he came into the barn smelling of Astrid and harnessing his dragon friend for a night flight to get rid of â€| frustration. Eh, dragon sensibilities had thicker skin, apparently.

The tiny posse of dragon children that were tottering and playing around his feet were apparently leading him somewhere. They were also much older than any of the other dragon babies that were hatching around them. With a few chirps, they dashed ahead, the baby nightmare he'd picked up flapping a short distance before it too began ambling towards a group of adult dragons. Hiccup almost turned away before a familiar roar made him turn back for a second look. Hoark's nightmare

and Fireworm both had their necks stretched as far as they would go to peer at him. Meatlug and Farthog were both snoring on one side, the gaggle of gronkle babies flying and tumbling towards them. Stormfly and Clover were intertwined in an array of colourful scales, licking and nursing at the nadder babies that had already returned to their nest.

"Huh," Hiccup said, moving forward cautiously, only to be greeted rather enthusiastically by the parents as well as the hatchlings. A part of him found it strange that the parent dragons weren't more aggressive towards him with all their newly hatched young out and about, but none of them were paying him any mind, and certainly not the dragons who were most used to him. He sat down beside Fireworm's flank, two other nightmare babies coming to sniff at him curiously as the one with red flanks flopped right in his lap as if it owned him.

A cry went up into the sky, and Hiccup's head jerked to it so fast his neck cracked. Two black shapes were circling the island, playfully batting at each other. Some of the other dragons ducked and covered their nests, but the Berk dragons gave a collective gaggle of roars, and both figures dove towards them.

The two night furies landed with the usual, flowing grace of black water. Hiccup didn't dare move up to his friend yet, peering at him to see what his reaction was, before noticing that Toothless was craning his neck and peering this way and that, the female night fury beside him apparently content to rest against his side and look around the area and dragons her partner had chosen as neighbours. Hiccup stood slowly, and Toothless roared and let his tongue loll happily the moment he spotted him. Bounding over, the dragon pushed him and nudged him with his head until he was standing right in front of the female who was backing away with some alarm and giving small yips and growls. Toothless growled warily before he gave Hiccup another nudge,

"Bud, calm down!" he said with a laugh. "Give her a chance to get to know me, no? I remember one really skittish night fury who wouldn't let me touch him for hours on end!" Toothless gave a huff and an outraged look, and the other night fury gave what Hiccup had come to recognise as the dragons' version of a laugh - deep serial vocalisations with shining eyes and a cheeky grin. Hiccup smiled at her and held his arm out. She stopped laughing abruptly, backing away slightly with fearful, uncertain eyes, and Hiccup purposefully began rubbing Toothless' chin while he watched her. "It's ok. I don't bite. I really hope you don't either."

And it happened all over again, the timid, side-stepping approach, the bright eyes shooting from hand to face, the scaly nose - slightly smaller this time - pressing into his palm in an outline of warm, vibrant scales. She twitched her nose once she moved back, but instead of snorting and running away, she gave her nose a pensive lick, then licked his still-outstretched hand, proceeding to his face and armour.

"Arugh," he complained, trying his best to keep the drool out of his mouth as Toothless laughed at him. When the female was satisfied, she smacked her lips, as if evaluating his taste, then trotted off to find a free space - probably to nestle down and have a good nap. Toothless had a rather self-satisfied gleam in his eyes Hiccup didn't

want to think about too hard. Then he had the audacity to puff his chest out and nod his head towards her, looking at Hiccup expectantly.

"Gotta say, you do have good taste." Toothless preened. Hiccup contained a snort by a hair. "I really hope the babies resemble their mother, because their dad, ho boyâ€!" Toothless gave him an open-mouthed look of betrayal and then huffed at him, whacking him with a wing. Hiccup only laughed, following his disgruntled friend as they nudged each other, Hiccup helping out in what turned out to be a search for comfy rocks.

It was only fair that he helped his dragon friend build his nest. Toothless had been Hiccup's nest for five years.

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This next bit contains torture. I'm not pulling all the punches.

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Thuggory swallowed hard as he followed his father into Berk's prisons. He'd seen the cells back home, and to be honest, Berk seemed to have a much easier policy on its prisoners than the Meatheads did, because these cells looked almost hospitable next to theirs, treating their content with respect, at least. This cell in particular, however, made his stomach lurch with nausea as the smell of blood permeated the walls.

They hadn't gone easy on him, and for that he got a sadistic sort of pleasure he'd gotten entirely from his bloodline, he supposed. Still, it wasn't a sight he was going to relish for too long, nor was it one he was going to brag about to his children.

The curl of worry bloomed in his abdomen once again when he thought of Heather, her precious belly, and the very real danger they were all in.

"Say it again, pond scum," Stoick hissed, twisting the man's fingers another turn. The other man screamed, but it ended in a cackle, his missing teeth making speckles of blood fly off his face to spot those around him.

"If you're so happy to hear it, I should have said it sooner - but then you wouldn't all have been stuck here, would you," he said with the same smirk of unadulterated, mad joy on his face. "Yes, I sent a bird off yesterday just before you traitors to your bloodlines got me. They know you're all stuck here like so many sitting ducks, with no dragons and more folk than weapons children, elderly, gravid women -" This last he directed at Thuggory in the sly, sleazy tone of satisfaction that precedes a man doing a horrifying act to an innocent just because he can. Thuggory's fist landed on the man's mouth twice before he managed to curb the urge to smash the rest of the man's face in. No one in the room even tried to stop him. He wiped the blood off his knuckles on the man's own clothes, not wanting to dirty his own.

"You find it funny, don't you, little shit?" Wolftooth said. Thuggory had never seen the UglyThug chief seethe, but apparently, he had a

temper. Dogsbreath was there too, and Cami had been the one pressing the hot poker into the man's flesh with uttermost glee, speaking about something the man should remember next time he thought about raping an innocent little girl.

Sleet. What they'd planned to do to Sleet. For the love of Asgard, one of these bastards was her father - though apparently, not this one.

"I find it funny, too," Wolftooth went on, picking up a sword and toying with it as he moved towards the man who used to be his general. "You're being taken to pieces in a room far away from your home. Your wife and sons back home have no idea that as soon as I land in UglyThug again, I'm going to set fire to your hall, kill all of them and put their heads on pikes. Then I'm going to take your daughters and give them to my men - just as you planned to do."

"You wouldn't dare, you rotten scum," he hissed, more blood flying from his mouth.

"Ah, wouldn't I?" Wolftooth went on. "Have I gone soft, you think? Is that your opinion of me? Ah well, better rectify it then. And what better way than to punish traitors horribly and publically, aye? It's true. Your daughters should get their special treatment in the public square."

Thuggory shivered. He had no idea whether Dogsbreath's father meant that or not. It was against treaty laws, but no one was saying anything to protest, not even Cami.

"What I would like to know," Bertha asked, her voice almost suave, "is why. Good standing, good position, riches. You had them all. You threw it to the dogs. Why? You got bored one morning and thought it was a good idea to align yourself with a madman?"

"We wanted the dragon power to ourselves," the man finally yelled. "You bunch of incompetent idiots don't realise what you are doing here - giving up that boy's knowledge to these bastards when we had him in our houses and homes for years, teaching us, giving his knowledge to us. Why should he come back to Berk when we could have kept him there for our use?" He turned to Stoick with a bloodied sneer. "Don't think we don't know - don't think the whole archipelago doesn't know why the boy left. You all tiptoe about it like polite little faggots, but the truth is that Berk didn't want him." He gave that malicious smirk again, "his father didn't want him. So he came to us, and we should have kept him!"

"And you think he would have left UglyThung be after I was killed? You think Hiccup would have been taken to UglyThug? You truly are stupid." Wolftooth actually laughed. "Stoick, you hear this personal insult for your son and heir. What is the punishment you request?"

"Cut his leg off," Stoick said with a flat tone in his voice, as if he were commenting about the weather. Probably not even that, as yesterday's storm would probably warrant more feeling than that. "Maybe he'll become UglyThug's dragon trainer like that."

"I find I like that suggestion," Wolftooth replied, bringing down the sword he was handling once, twice, three times, without second

thoughts. Even as the man's screams vibrated around the room. His threat to Heather and their baby rang in Thuggory's ears, and he couldn't master any pity, just disgust at having to witness this. "Now, Crocus my dear, what else do we need to know? Hurry it on, will you? If you're nice and tell us everything, we may be on time to stop the blood flow." The man's eyes turned wild, the whites showing all around. "Drip, drip, drip," Wolftooth went on playfully, holding up the bloodied sword to the fire, making the room smell of burned blood. "Your time passes."

Thuggory dragged himself into the guest hall later, more shell-shocked than he would have liked to admit. As he crept into the main room, shuffling his clothes off and throwing them into the fire, boots and all, he shivered with more than the cold. He slid into bed, curling up around his lovely wife's body, his head on her belly and his arms curling around her protectively. The child inside her gave a happy, jaunty little kick like it always did when his dad gave his mum a tummy rub.

That man's threats still rang in ears like trapped bees, like so many punches to the head leaving him reeling.

"Hmmm, hey," Heather muttered sleepily, her hand falling to his hair with practiced ease so that she didn't even open her eyes as he looked up at her above the swell of her augmented breast.

"Sorry I woke you, darling," he replied, keeping his voice even. He gloried in the nudge she gave him at the endearment, even if she continued caressing his head after. "Late meeting. Go back to sleep."

"Mkay!" she replied happily, and he sighed in relief at her oblivious return to sleep. It made him want to shudder, her knowing what had been said in that room. It just wasn't going to happen. Ever.

It had been Madfoot's turn next to join the 'fun' party. Thankfully, the heirs had been dismissed. Gods in Asgard how was he going to stand it when he couldn't get away after the first one? No wonder his dad drank so much.

Thuggory sighed, closing his eyes, trying to forget the looming threat with all his might. He held Heather in his arms, cradling her tenderly - his family was all here, in the circle of his chest. And they were all in danger.

His little baby nudged his arm again, and Thuggory felt himself relax as he smiled involuntarily. A little foot, unmistakable shape. The little boy - it was a boy no matter what Cami said - was already a fighter, like his dad.

He'd protect them. Even if Fanghorn didn't come back on time. They'd be safe, even if he died in battle and never knew his son, they would be safe. Thuggory let himself relax into sleep with his son's foot nudging his palm through Heather's belly, the smell of their combined skin in his nose.

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"Hop to the market, one two three, get a bunch of apples, three times three; then the man will ask for pay, but you'll say you have no hay,

and run away, run away four five six!"

Ättta watched as Dartbolt hopped around on the chalk-drawn grid Aunty Astrid had thought her with all the different numbers and runes on it, her much taller friend tottering slightly to hop short steps. Ättta knew she was littler than Dartbolt, because her sister Dartfoot was her friend, and they were the same age, and Dartbolt was Dartfoot's BIG sister. That meant she was bigger. So the grid Ättta drew was a little small for Dartbolt.

But Dartfoot couldn't count, and Dartbolt could, and Aunty Astrid had been teaching her for the past five months! She could count to ten and write her name and Uncle Hiccup's name!

"I want to play too!" Darfoot said, puffing out her cheeks. And it was only fair, Ättta thought, because her poor friend wasn't playing because she didn't know how to count, and it was sad to sit down and watch other children play. Ättta knew that - she had been closed in nana's house for so very long until Uncle Hiccup had come and rescued her!

"I know another game!" Ättta said; Aunty Astrid had taught her this one, then she'd gone into the other room to be angry at nana, but nana had only laughed. So she threw a rock at the grid and began hopping on the steps one after the other, irrelevantly of the runes or numbers in them as she sang the tune Aunty Astrid had started to teach her, and which then nana had thought her the rest when Aunty Astrid strangely refused to continue. Ättta had almost been upset at Aunty Astrid, but then nana had told her that her aunt only wanted to sing this one with Uncle Hiccup.

She didn't really understand, but she supposed it was a mummy and daddy thing.

"Throw out the old clothes get in the new, fill up the chest and put on the stew!" Tottering on one foot, she picked up the stone and tossed it again. "Give him the sword and give her the ring, braid up her hair behind earrings. Wait from the fruit to fall to the grass, after Thor's hammer knocked on the glass!" She stopped where she was, looking at the other two girls, "we can sing it together! My nana taught me this one!"

"I like it!" Dartfoot said excitedly. Ättta got off the grid and gave her the stone, and then she began singing the ditty and clapping her hands, Dartfoot and Dartbolt following uncertainly until they learned the tune.

They had been playing the new game for a while when one of the older boys, with his baby nadder still with him, came up to them with a wave.

"Um, hello," he said, and he sounded a bit silly, looking around like he wasn't sure who he was speaking to. His nadder was not as big as Aunty Astrid's, and Ättta held up a hand to it. It came to give it a sniff, but it moved away with disinterest.

Humph, she didn't much like nadders, she decided - she preferred a pretty neigh furry, like Uncle Hiccup's.

"Have you seen Hilda?" the new boy asked. "Snotlout wanted all the

ones who still have dragons to go to the front of the hall, next to the doors. He has something important to tell us."

Āttta instantly felt sad, remembering Hiss, and the fact that he wasn't there. But Aunty Astrid had promised that Uncle Hiccup would bring them back, and Uncle Hiccup always kept his promises.

Still, Āttta supposed that it was ok to worry about Hiss, the same way that Aunty Astrid was worried about Uncle Hiccup. She had promised Uncle Hiccup to take care of Hiss, so that meant she could worry about him.

"I haven't seen her since a while ago, she was with her mama," Dartbolt replied. "Does Snotlout want us now? I still have my little-est terror."

"No, he said in an hour. What are you doing?" the boy asked curiously.

"We're learning hopping games that Āttta is teaching us," Dartbolt replied. "She learned them from Astrid, Master Hiccup's promised!"

"Oh!" the boy replied, and his cheeks went red for some reason. He must be feeling as hot as Āttta then. "Can I play?"

"Yes," Āttta shrugged, "Aunty Astrid used to play with Uncle Hiccup, so boys can play too."

"Aunty, Uncle?"

"Aunty Astrid is my Aunty," Āttta replied, thinking it was sully that he did not understand, "and so Uncle Hiccup is my Uncle, because he married Aunty Astrid."

He blinked at her, and Āttta wondered whether he was teasing her, and whether she could punch him. Uncle Hiccup hadn't liked it, but he was an adult. Maybe she could still punch not adult people when they teased her?

There was a loud booming noise, and many people made frightened noises. Dartfoot hugged Dartbolt and hid her face, and Āttta really wished Hiss was there, or nana. All of her cousins were with their mamas, but her own mama was feeling unwell, so she was not allowed to stay beside her.

"What's happening!" the boy asked, sounding like boys usually did when they were asking for something and trying to look taller. It was unfair, really, that all the adults had to be so tall, and they had to be so short, but no one was telling them what the big noise had been.

"Just the wind, lad!" a big man with a big beard said as he passed by, petting the boy on the helmet. The nadder gave him a sniff and then sat down, and the boy sat down next to the dragon.

"The wind is still strong," he said sadly. "I hope Master Hiccup's ok."

"Why wouldn't he be?" Āttta asked, feeling offended for her Uncle.

"Uncle Hiccup is the best dragon rider ever. He and Toothless are heroes, my nana says so. And he promised Aunty Astrid something, and he hasn't done it yet, so of course he'd come back."

"But the storm was really big this time, and my dad was saying that maybe the sea took him," the boy replied sadly.

"That's very silly, what would the sea do with Uncle Hiccup?" Åttta replied.

"I â€“ I don't know," the boy answered, sounding thoughtful. Åttta smiled.

"See! So the sea wouldn't need to take Uncle Hiccup. Let's go ask Aunty Astrid, she will know for sure!"

"Ok!" he asked, instantly standing up. He took her hand, and she began dragging him towards the last place she'd seen her Aunt. sure enough, she was still there, sitting on a bench at the table with many tall people around her.

"... you sure you're ok with that, Snotlout?" she said, turning towards a very big man with a big horny helmet. The boy next to her gave her a nudge and told her to be quiet, and Åttta understood that it was because the adults were talking. they usually didn't like it when they were interrupted.

"I'll ask Hiccup if he has other plans for me when he's back," the big man answered, and Åttta punched the boy triumphantly, pointing towards him. The boy rubbed his elbow, but he smiled back. Even the big man knew that Uncle Hiccup would be back soon. "But I don't think he'll have a problem. I don't have a dragon, and the ground forces are pretty set. I'll go to the safe haven; I've recruited a few of the young ones who still have dragons to come with us. They're too small to fight, but they can help protect."

"Good call," Astrid nodded, patting the bigger man's shoulder and looking back down at all the different papers. "Ruffnut, I'll need you on Flat-Fart. It's one of the only dragons to stay behind. Droplaug agreed to take Woodnut. But I want you to know one thing: you are to play it safe, hear me? That babe's too young."

"I'll do the boring thing, no problem. Fishlegs promised to come down for me in Helheim, and I'm too scared to see if he actually would."

"It'd be awesomeâ€|" A man who looked like her replied, and the table laughed. Åttta didn't understand why. She didn't really understand anything of what they were saying, speaking about busy-workers and arm-nadder. She began to creep forward, pulling the boy with her until they were under the table, many legs around them making her feel safe. She sat down, and the boy sat next to her, looking a bit more worried than she was. She wondered why, and tried to listen to what the adults were saying better.

"Stoick asked us to take care of all the guests - that goes without saying. However, allies or not, I propose we blind-fold them on the way to the safe place. We can't let outsiders to Berk know. Cami, would your women have objections?"

"Oh, none of my women will be going there. They'll be on ground forces, the lot of them. At least Sting came back, that rascal! But I think the women from Freezing will probably go there, and the ones from UglyThug for sure. Sleet, you have no problem, right?"

"What's a blindfold?" Ætta asked. The boy took his belt and put on his eyes. Oh! They were going to play hide and seek!

"There's the problem of the animals." Oh, that was nana! "We either start carting the lot now, and see what we can do for eggs and milk, or else we may not have time to save them. And I don't see those beasts be merciful to their own kind."

There was a bunch of grumbles. So the sheep were being naughty to other sheep?

"Let's give that until tomorrow. Hopefully, Hiccup will be back by then. With Toothless' help, it will be easier." The boy grinned at her when Aunty Astrid spoke. She gave him a smile back.

"And if he isn't?"

"Then we'll just have to go it the old way and lug the lot ourselves," Aunty sighed. "Very well, I need to ask Stoick a few things. I will meet you all again here in an hour."

The other people around the table began leaving, Aunty Astrid remained sitting there, and Ætta peered up at her from under the table. She was rubbing her forehead. Uncle Hiccup did that sometimes when he was thinking, and now Aunty Astrid was doing it too. Two very tall men came up to the table before she could pull on her Aunty's boot, and their big feet stopped there. One of them was the big man who had spoken before, she realised.

"Astrid, listen," he said in a low voice, "They've been noticing some movement on the South-West coast. Thunk came in to report it to Stoick a few minutes ago."

"What sort of movement?" Ætta blinked as her Aunty almost sounded scared. Aunty stood up, and Ætta looked at the boy sitting beside her, who returned her gaze with wide eyes.

"No one's docked or landed - there are only one set of prints. But they're pretty sure something's going on down there. All the tra- â€| the ones we know of are accounted for. They're thinking there's someone else."

"That is â€| really bad," Aunty replied worriedly. There was noise on top of their heads, as Aunty Astrid moved some things around on the table. "Did Stoick set up patrols?"

"Yeah. We're spread out a little thin though." The other man was talking now, and Ætta didn't know his name.

"Who's that?" she whispered to the boy beside her, who seemed to know everyone.

"It's Tuffnut," he replied. fiddling with his tunic and looking a bit nervous. Ætta took his hand in hers, because she was beginning to feel scared, too.

"Very well. Just tell Cami I said that, Tuff, and she'll know what I'm talking about," Aunty Astrid said. Ætta had no idea what she had missed, but Aunty sounded brave again, and Ætta felt better.

"How do you women do thatâ€| it's like you have this weirdâ€| mind-talk thingâ€|"

The two men moved away, and Ætta decided it was time to talk to her Aunty, before someone else came to steal her attention away. She let the boy's hand go, and scrambled up to stand next to Aunty Astrid, pulling on her skirt and furs.

"Aunty! "

"Goodness!" Aunty Astrid blinked down at her, then gave her a smile, though it looked more tired than usual. Ætta didn't like that - her mummy often looked tired, and now she was ill.

"Aunty Astrid should go to bed," she said sternly. Her Aunty didn't look impressed and she folded her arms.

"And that is something that I am going to say back at you, little lady. Now how long have you been â€| you two been under there. Gustav, you should know better."

The boy came out, his cheeks looking all pink again as he spoke to her Aunty, and he was holding his helmet sheepishly. The small nadder that was with him trotted up, as it hadn't fit under the table with them.

"But everyone's up," Ætta replied. "And â€| is something scary going to happen, Aunty?" She folded her arms, happy to feel her dolls tucked into the belt of her tunic. They made her feel better when Uncle Hiccup wasn't near.

Aunty looked at the both of them, her hand absently petting the dragon. Then she sat down and lifted Ætta into her lap. "Maybe it is," she replied as she pulled the boy over too. "And when it does, I want you both to make me a promise."

Ætta held her little finger out right away. Aunty Astrid's was bandaged, so she was very careful when she hooked her own to it. Aunty Astrid was tough though - she only smiled, although the bandage meant she must have an ow.

"I need you two to obey all the adults. Gustav, Snotlout called you all to meet in a while; please make sure you listen. Hiccup isn't back yet, but if- when he is, he'll need us backing him up. And we're counting on you and Baldr, alright?"

"Of course!" the boy replied, puffing his chest out. He looked like he was going to fall over forwards. Ætta giggled at him.

"And you will go with your mama and aunties, alright?" Aunty Astrid continued, turning to her. Ætta nodded. "I will be busy, and so will Uncle Hiccup. Aunty Droplaug will be telling people where to go, so if you get lost, you go to her. You know aunty Droplaug, yes?"

"Yes," Ättta nodded. But Aunty Astrid wasn't smiling still. And Uncle Hiccup had told her that sometimes, you had to smile at someone. Then she noticed a wooden pendant and fingered it. "Is this new, Aunty? I've never seen it."

"No," she replied with a sigh. "It's Uncle Hiccup's. I'm keeping it till he's back. I still have to finish it, see?"

"Oh!" Ättta took her dolls out of her belt, bringing her Uncle Hiccup doll forward. "Then can you make one for him too?"

Aunty Astrid looked at her dolls for a moment, especially the part where their hands were tied. Then she nodded, but she didn't smile, not really. Ättta knew she was right when she spoke to Uncle Hiccup last time. He had better come home soon. Aunty Astrid always got so sad and lonely when he went away.

"I'm going to smile at you, Aunty," Ättta said, folding her arms sternly while her leg wiggled, so she kicked it because she felt slightly nervous. But Uncle Hiccup had told her this, and she wasn't going to let him down. "Uncle Hiccup said that sometimes you have to smile at someone to pick up almonds, and other times to pick up these," she touched Aunty Astrid's mouth at the corners. Her Aunty blinked at her, and then the corners of her mouth went up and she smiled. Ättta smiled back happily - Uncle Hiccup was always right.

"Thank you, sweetheart," she said, and Ättta preened, so happy that Aunty Astrid loved her too and that she'd made her smile. She gave her a big hug, and Aunty hugged her so very tight, too. Ättta snuggled into her chest, listening to hear heart for a few moments, until Aunty Astrid sent her with the boy to play with Dartbolt and Dartfoot again, she skipped happily and giddily away. Maybe when her mama felt better, she could ask her to spend more time with Uncle and Aunty. Like that she'd smile more too.

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The joys of little children. And of wake up calls. And yes, baby night furies. Foxy and I have agreed that Toothless has more than enough game, and letting it go to waste is a criminal offense.

21. Leave

Hiccup interacting with dragons is one of the most interesting things I have ever written.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 19 - Leave_

_**Leave something for someone but don't leave someone for

something.**_

â€• _**Enid Blyton**_

The hall doors had been barred, the fires were low and the atmosphere was heavy enough to smother a nightmare. The chiefs were gathered around the hall tables again, the generals of each village there. Wolftooth's remaining generals were looking as alert as it was humanly to possibly be.

Wolftooth himself was looking haggard and worn. The heirs weren't there that night - they had been given their own tasks and were out there taking care of them - his son was out there. There was no way, no way in which Stoick would ever allow the thought of his son dying to enter his mind.

Five years of Winters and hardships hadn't taken him down. There was no way a simple storm would. They were Vikings. Flying through a storms was like taking a walk on the beach.

"Everyone's accounted for, then?" Brawlnife asked, taking a swig of ale. That man functioned on alcohol - even when he needed to be clear-headed, he somehow managed to get things done with more mead in his head than a normal person would pass out on. Still, Stoick almost wished for a keg himself - the pressure was making his heart beat wildly, and even though Astrid was up and helping, that actually made him worry more. That girl needed to stop and recover from her ordeal - but there just wasn't enough time.

"Yes, the gronkles are tasked, the riders informed. There are only three dragons left of that species," Bertha sighed, rubbing her face. "Gods in Asgard, we are all going to Valhalla, whether we win or lose this battle. The odds are stacked in our detriment so high that it's a wonder we can see the horizon."

"How many dragons do we have left in all?" Bile asked, scratching at his chin in a way that spoke of nervousness rather than any itching.

"Around thirty, between nadders, gronkles and nightmares. We don't have zipplebacks, but we have a few young terrors we can use as diversions."

"That's hardly enough to defend against a horde of savage attackers," Footsore growled. "But I can tell you that my fleet has been warned. With any luck, they took shelter from that storm and they will bring up the rear of those bastards without being seen. We may have reinforcements towards the end of the battle."

"May," Stoick sighed. "I'm not comfortable leaving my village's fate up to chance. If the main village falls, all the people on the island are as good as dead."

"We won't fall," Bertha said with a snort. "all of us will be wearing your son's mail. My Gobber's finishing the suits up right now."

"That will give us an edge, it's true, but we need a better strategy. We cannot bank on the fact that they will have suffered from the storm," Wolftooth said. "I've sent word back to UglyThug that there

will be the need to double the guard - if they have any allies left there, they will be caught, but that will do us little good here. The same thing goes for whoever is left of them here â€“ we need to find if they still have an ally left at large."

"If they really find out we don't have dragons ..." Berta said ominously.

"Regardless whether they know or not, we are doomed if they do not come back." Bile said. "I never thought I'd say this, not with what a pest they can be, but they are the only hope we have. If the entire fleet of ships they own lands on the shores here â€“"

"We have patrols. We'll be warned," Stoick said, fingering the island's border on the map spread in front of them all. "But you are right. That is as much advantage as we have at the moment. If the armada has survived the storm intact, we will just have to go down fighting."

"Like there was any doubt of that," Bertha laughed, and all of them followed, the hopeless of the moment seeming almost hilarious. They were Vikings. Dying was an occupational hazard.

Stoick's only thought was for Astrid, and for all the sweet, pretty lasses on Berk. He hoped they went down fighting, and didn't suffer otherwise. This kind of battle could leave more wounds than mortal ones.

"Well, we can relocate some of the nadders - we do have four of them, and -"

There was bang against the massive front door. They all looked up at it, fingering weapons and bodies tense, ready to fight. If this was one of the sentinels on patrol, having spotted something, they were going to need to evacuate everyone at once, as quickly as possible, and then -

Stoick motioned to Spitelout, who nodded and quickly ran to the door, hauling the bar up and pulling the door open.

"Let me go! You have no right to do this!" the strident voice said, and Mildew's horrible face followed, being pushed into the room with his hands held behind his back. Tuffnut Thorston followed, an expression on his face Stoick had never seen before.

"Tuffnut," Stoick called, taking in the display as he and the others moved forward. He really hoped this was not the twin's idea of a joke. It really wasn't the moment.

"Stoick! Why don't you keep better control of your youths! This delinquent assaulted me while I was taking my daily stroll on the-"

Tuffnut actually punched him in the face, throwing him onto the floor. He looked furious, and the happy-go-lucky twin had never cared about anything enough to get mad about it, that Stoick knew.

"Shut up, bastard," he growled. He looked up at the assembled chiefs with a sneer. "This little piece of shit was on the beach. Taking a stroll, he said - my knotted trousers! He was sending messages!"

Tuffnut produced a scroll.

"What!" Stoick yelled, leaping forward and snatching the paper up. He looked down at the old bag of bones after he'd read it, keeping in the urge to kick him by a hair. "You traitor bastard."

"Let me see," Bertha asked without preamble, taking the paper and then turning it around to the others once she was done. The faces became stony and livid as the paper passed hands, and Brawlnife spit down at Mildew's face.

"Stoick, you won't really believe the nonsense this boy is cooking up, will you? You know as well as I do that he's a troublemaker! It's his idea of a joke!"

Tuffnut surprised Stoick by kicking him in the stomach. Mildew gasped, coughing and spluttering protests to his frail, old body.

"Shut up, son of a troll," Tuffnut growled, cheeks going red with fury. "How's this a joke? Hiccup asked me to do extra, secret patrols. And Snotlout. We've been doing it, and guess who I found sending a terror off today? You, that's who. I hate smelly old men." He spat at Mildew's feet. "And you're an idiot, you got a terror from the Berk coop. I just had to follow it back into the terror sleeping pens on this island." He kicked him again. "Dragon hater. And using dragons to betray your own people!"

"Sven!" Stoick yelled. The man, who had been standing out on guard at the door, peeked in. "Take this sack of filth to the prison. Put him nowhere near the other traitors; I don't want them to know their last man outside is caught. I want to be able to tell them."

"Sir!" Sven answered, picking Mildew up and dragging him away.

"Well done, Tuffnut," Stoick said, patting the boy on the back. "Good job, you and Snotlout. If he's out on patrol too, call him off. Go to rest the both of you; I want a full report tomorrow."

The Thorston nodded, trotting down the hall stairs and out of sight into the night.

"At least we have one worry less," Woolftooth sighed, coming up behind him. Stoick slapped him on the shoulder.

"Stop feeling guilty about this," Stoick said to his friend. "You've been the one most betrayed by this lot of bastards."

"He's right," Footsore growled. "I've even lost a friend as close to a brother, to his own son. The bastard will pay. If he doesn't die in battle, he is going to wish he had, because I'm going to do him things that no one should ever know save me and his dying flesh."

"Hear, hear," Bile growled. "My little boy should have had his first Thing and his first Snoggletog as official heir without all this. He'll pay for that too."

"They will pay for everything." Stoick sighed. "We should get some rest. Most of us need to meet again tomorrow morning at the break to

continue, but I think we all need to touch head to a pillow and rest."

A chorus of tired 'ayes' followed after him as he hunkered down the stairs.

The trip down had never seemed so long

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Hiccup looked up at the sky, going pink with the clouds turning into some of Blunt the Baker's pink berry pastries. He could really use one of those sweet concoctions right now, though to be honest, he'd do with anything that was not a fire-baked fish. Preferably some of Astrid's fish stew.

He snickered at himself. Just yesterday he was thinking of going back to the bachelor life. There wasn't any of Astrid's stew in the bachelor life. That alone told him it was an aborted idea. It was bad for the health, living without that full pot of salty, fragrant-

A warble and a rough nudge interrupted his thoughts. Hiccup sat up, and Toothless gave him a nonplussed look before nodding at the fire, where his fish was moving past 'cooked' and into 'charred' territory. He scrambled for it, ignoring the chorus of amused dragons around him as he blew on the smoking food. They already thought he was weird for cooking his fish.

"Yeah, you all find this so entertaining," he replied, his tone flat. Toothless snorted and came to sit down next to him, the female dragon looking at them curiously from her nest of melded rocks. She'd laid two eggs yesterday, and had been the willing recipient of fish and cuddles both delivered by his enthusiastic battle-brother. Toothless had flown in and out the island five times, twice of which were with Hiccup, each time returning with enough food to feed all the dragons of Berk in his belly. The female night fury was surrounded by a huge pile of fish, and looked like she was lording it over the other girls; she was still pretty curious about Hiccup, though, and made no effort to hide it.

Toothless gave him another nudge when he spent too long looking at the female dragon. When Hiccup turned to look at him, the dragon gave him a warble and a tilted head.

"Oh, it's nothin--" he was interrupted by Toothless giving him a patented 'None of that bullshit' look. He'd learned it from Astrid, Hiccup could swear on it. He sighed in defeat. "It's just that I'm so close to Berk, but I'm stuck here. And I made Astrid a promise."

Toothless warbled and put his head on Hiccup's lap, looking up at him sadly. The Viking just gave him a scratch behind the ear-plates, making him purr.

"I'm not blaming you. Your place is here, no need to apologise." Toothless still looked up at him with chagrin. "No, really. I'd never ask you to leave her and the eggs behind!" he turned his head to look at the female to find blue eyes giving him a thorough search before she stood, taking an egg in her mouth carefully and bringing it to them. Toothless gave a strange warble when he saw her, but she

ignored him and pushed his head out of Hiccup's lap with her own. Toothless was initially indignant until he saw his partner drop the egg onto Hiccup's belly. He scrambled for it quickly, and held it close, only for the female to bring the second one and dropping it onto his chest too, tongue fussing at it and mouth nibbling at his hair with retracted teeth.

"Erâ€|?" he asked uncertainly as the female made various vocalisations and warbles, nudging Toothless who was still looking at her in displeasure. But then she began rubbing her head under his chin, and he gave a determined gargle for only about three seconds. Hiccup snorted, making sure to keep the eggs warm against him as he gave his dragon a knowing look. "Now, you will not be able to laugh at me when I give up the moment Astrid takes my hand." Toothless huffed and tried to look dignified again, much to his rider and the female's amusement, "Ooooh no, I'm not letting you live it down, ever." The female gave a squeak as Toothless batted her away but she licked the crest around his head, and he finally gave in with a defeated warble, sending Hiccup into fits of laughter.

"So, what's she proposing, bud? Because she's obviously won," he teased, making the female puff her chest out and huff, then walk up beside him and curl up challengingly against him, breaths huffing on her cuddled eggs. Hiccup gave his fish a bite before she could give it a lick.

Toothless just nudged him and then pointed his head towards the sky.

"Going for a flight?" Hiccup turned to the female, who was looking up at him. "That's what you suggested?" She gave a blink and he tilted his head to look at her better, "I don't understand. Why did you give me the eggs then? Do you want me to watch them while you two go up there?"

She blinked and straightened, twitching, but then she slapped her tail and looked annoyed. With a beseeching gargle she looked at Toothless with eyes as wide as they would go. He gave a huff, took one of the eggs gently into his mouth and motioned for Hiccup to get onto his back. With a hesitant wobble, he got into his saddle, still carefully cradling the other egg. Toothless walked around, forcing Hiccup to scramble for the handlebars, flapping his wings as he walked around in circles. Then he stopped, put the egg down, and the female came around to sit on it again, licking it and cooing at it. Hiccup blinked at them, scratching his head and carefully caressing the smooth egg with his thumb.

"So â€| you want to move the eggs?" he concluded, and both dragons gave him a tongue-lolling smile. "Right, ermâ€| why? And where to?" Toothless gave a shake, and Hiccup got off, tottering on one foot with one of his hands still holding the egg to his chest. Toothless nosed the crest on his armour. "To Berk? But why, when â€|?" The female gave a huff and Toothless nudged him. "Because I want to go? Toothless, I could hitch a ride on one of the others, I'm sure they could drop me off on Berk on a fishing round â€|"

The look of outraged indignation Toothless gave him at suggesting that he should fly with another dragon was eloquent enough to make him feel sheepish.

"I wouldn't enjoy it, bud; it'd just be routine. You know, necessityâ€|" He felt like he was justifying himself with a jealous girlfriend. Wellâ€| between Astrid's axe and Toothless's everything, he was pretty screwed, and pretty well spoken for under all angles.

And he was getting the impression that Åtta had decided she had a claim, too, somewhere. He felt like a plot of land, being divided up by its owners. Well, at least Astrid seemed happy with her huge portion of the â€| plot of land.

"Are you sure, though?" he asked, "can the eggs handle it?" The female scoffed at him as if offended, so maybe there was some dragon-y pride there about dragon shell thickness, and female dragons competed to see whose egg-shells were the hardest and most durable.

He needed to sleep, soon, because he was thinking gibberish.

"Right, true â€| but I told everyone that I'd get their dragon back, and I can't just show up and ..." he rubbed his forehead. How was he going to do this? There was exactly zero chance that any of the other dragons would be as loyal to him as Toothless was, and especially not when this tiny rock island was so much _safer_ for the new little onesâ€|

Toothless gave a roar, his wings flapping slightly from its strength. All the Berk dragons twitched and raised their heads. Stormfly walked up, tinies in tow, and gave a chittering set of cackles, which Toothless answered with his usual high-pitched vocalisations. More and more of the dragons began rising, lowering themselves just enough to let their still-tiny clamber onto their backs. Within the time it took for the sun to set, all the Berk dragons, their mates and their progeny were looking at Toothless expectantly. The female night fury looked ready to jump his bones again, and Hiccup found himself oddly cheering her on as she slapped his dragon with her tail.

Right; he'd forgotten that his dragon liked to order the others about.

His night fury just turned to look at him like he was stupid. The female took one of the eggs into her mouth, and Hiccup carefully and delicately brought his cloak around to cover the egg, quickly fashioning a tight and secure sling so that he could grab onto the handlebars of the saddle.

"I really appreciate this, bud," he said, and he wasn't ashamed that his voice wobbled with emotion. They were, perhaps, eight hours' flight away from Berk. They would be there before the sun, tomorrow. And if his calculation wasn't completely off, Snoggletog was the day after tomorrow. He'd keep his promise to Astrid, too.

As soon as Hiccup was strapped in, Toothless gave a roar and took off. All the dragons followed after him without hesitation, and though they went moderately fast, Hiccup noticed that they were certainly not going at night fury speed as they cruised to an updrift and then just used the winds to glide.

Ok, make that nine hours. It was going to be a long, sleepless night; but it was going to be so worth it.

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Tuffnut was seething like someone had put his trousers on fire, then tried to put it out with tar.

He was sitting down in a corner, arms crossed, purposefully in the shadows. The hall was still full of people, even though the storm had let up that morning. The lack of dragons was making them band together - Tuff, of course, knew that shit was going down very soon. Snotlout knew too. Most of the families who were just the quiet agricultural kind had no idea what was going on, but it only took so many hushed and quick meetings with Stoick, the other chiefs and Astrid's own table of Better Management - or that was what Ruff called it anyway. Everyone was starting to catch on that something was happening, had happened, or was going to happen.

Some people thought that Hiccup had died, and that all this furore was all about this. Tuffnut personally thought he'd probably show up riding a scouldron like it was a cart rolling down a hill, personally, but not everyone thought the same. Even Astrid tried to escape as often as she can to go stare at the sky sometimes, he'd noticed. And she always came back with this look on her face that he'd never seen on Astrid before. It was sad, really sad.

The worse was her though. She was ignoring him. Or avoiding him. Sure, she was busy, and she was important - he knew that, she was heir to her tribe - and so she had a lot to do. So he'd offered to help when she'd looked like she was going to kill that map they'd given her, but some of the women around her sneered, and then she'd told him that if she'd needed his help, she would have told him, and given him her back.

It had ∞ hurt. In his chest. It was like that time Ruffnut had punched him so hard that all the breath had gone out, and it had taken him a good few minutes to start breathing again without wheezing.

So he'd walked away and come to sit down here, and hadn't moved since. He'd already spoken to Stoick and Astrid, and Snotlout had done the same; the other man had been sitting with him for some time, but now he'd gone off to talk to some red-head or other. Idiot, he should stay away from barmaids. He knew what happened when one didn't.

Maybe it was because of the letters. Well, yeah, it was definitely because of the letters. But last they'd spoken, she'd assured him that she didn't care, and that they had a solution, and that Fishlegs or Hiccup had figured it out. They'd decided they were going to give a damn, and show up in public with each other, and stick together, and all that political shit be damned.

But here they were, and the first chance he got to help her, she suddenly behaved like she didn't really know him anymore.

His chest still hurt like he'd been kicked by a yak. So he folded his arms and glared at the hall and drank his ale, making sure to let everyone know how foul it tasted by snarling at it every time he took a gulp. His grandfather had even had to gall to walk - if his doddery, evil pace on that pointy staff could be called a walk - up

to him and congratulate him on his role in the traitors' capture. Hiccup had put him and Snotlout on Madfoot's trail, and since Snotlout had helped Hiccup out of the mess in the hall, it had been Tuffnut who'd managed to do most of the undetected stalking - he was used to it, he and Ruff used to stalk for fun. And especially since he'd heard that bit about the girl under that table with Camiâ€!

There his brain went again. He took another gulp, snarled at it and then slammed it down. Oddar the Oddhead gave him a look that was slightly weirded out - so he snarled at him, too. So obviously, everything was going swimmingly with everyone, with looming threats and tension and worry and missing dragons â€!

And his grandfather. He really wished the dragons would go evil again for a gap wide enough to eat him. Just him. But then the poor dragon would get indigestion, and if it was a gronkle it would fart up such a massive-

"Hi there, darling," rang a voice next to him, and all the hair on all his skin stood on end. Oddar even had the gall to give him a wink, and this time he really snarled at her.

It was her, the lying, thrice damned bitchy barmaid. He ignored her, and kept drinking his horrible ale. His eyes sought out the blonde mop he cared for so much and â€! there she was, her twin swords swinging at her waist, talking to a few of her woman generals.

He'd give his right hand for her to look his way for a few moments.

"Well, aren't we talkative tonight," she went on; she had always been like this, since he could remember. She'd played chase with all the men since she'd become a barmaid, and had always had a 'target of the week' - whoever either took her fancy or had become popular enough in the few days it took to catch her eye.

"No matter, though. I'm just glad I got you all tied up. Wouldn't want some other girl to snatch you away from me now, would I? Berk's got to take care of her heroes"

He almost spat in her face. His eyes followed Cami around, and her face DID turn towards him, but her eyes roamed on as if she'd seen through a wet linen tunic, and his chest gave another twinge. What was happening? Why was she doing this? Her eyes didn't even stick when they landed on the nasty piece of dragon dung sitting next to him and trying to thread her arm through his. His chest gave another yak-kick.

Heroes. This whole thing started because when the battle for Berk had come and he'd become one of the first dragon riders, he'd also become her catch of the week, though he didn't know it. He'd been happily writing letters to a pretty girl who loved things blowing up as much as he did. And then she'd decided that - when Snotlout turned her down - she wanted him to be her catch of a lifetime. And he'd had absolutely no say in it. He was a hero of Berk and thus her property in her eyes â€! she'd even said that to him exactly. Who talked like that? He was surprised she hadn't tried to seduce Hiccup - him being the big Thor's hammer of all heroes and all - but maybe she was smarter than she looked and she was afraid of Astrid. At least he

hoped so. Well, not like Hiccup would be willing â€| but a guy didn't have to be willing with this one. Just drunk enough.

So he stood up.

"I have shit to do," he growled out, and went to look for Snotlout. Or Astrid. Or anyone who could give him something to do other than sit there like a dying chicken and â€|

Chickens. Dying chickens. Well, fuck them all. They were preparing for the worse, weren't they? Well, who would expect chickens to be dangerous? With everyone in the Thorston clan hunkered down in the hall, no one was taking any notice of the chickens.

Good. Fuck them. Fuck their chickens, too.

He ducked his head and left the hall, never once looking back.

There were very few people outside - hardly any at all, between three quarters of Berk in the hall, and the rest mostly on patrol. The storm may have let up, but the cold and damp it left behind just made its way through your clothing and into your bones.

The sun had set - it's not like the sun took long to set right now. Snoggletog was the shortest day of the year anyway, and then later they'd have the Spring Festival when the days were a little longer, and they could send out the boats to the deceasedâ€|

He was almost done with the mixing of the feed in a few minutes and began heading back to the hall before he fed it to them, because he'd left his spear behind, when he decided - fuck that too. He headed towards the docks - he knew that Oddegar had been put on patrol that night, and he'd been none too happy about it, because he had a sore foot. So he went to relieve him, called it in as a favour, and sat down on the damned docs to look out at the sea.

It shouldn't feel so terrible, to be ignored for one night. It's not like she legitimately didn't have shit to do. And so what if she snubbed him in front of her generals? It didn't mean she meant anything by that, right? She was just stressed. They were all stressed.

Yeah, he was stressed too. He hadn't even fed the chickens, and now he was tied up on patrol. He was very stressed. That's why he was sitting by the ocean mooning like a sissy-girl, pouting like Hiccup and imagining he was seeing a bunch of dragons coming from between the clouds.

They were even growing closer, those dragon-shaped clouds. Shining like the moon was glinting off scales, and then there was a noise almost like a night fury..

"Fuck, it's real!" he called out to no one in particular. Then he lit a torch, began waving it frantically to the person on patrol in the next area. Their torch lit up and began waving too and the next one. He began yelling.

"The dragons! I think they're back! And I heard a night fury!"

"Where!" was the faint call back.

"Due south! Just left of the moon!"

"I see them too!" Someone called from the area over to the other side. "Praise be! We need to inform Stoick!"

"I'll go!" Tuffnut replied, putting the lit torch in the bracket and racing towards the hall. He'd never run up the stairs that fast, and as soon as he threw the hall doors open, he realised it was a mistake, because all that came out of his mouth was incoherent panting and wheezing.

"What is it?!" Stoick asked in his no-shit voice. Tuffnut swallowed quickly.

"The dragons! I sighted them! They're coming back!"

"Thor be praised!" Stoick said, a grin suddenly lighting his face. The hall erupted in cheers, and a blonde streak whizzed past him, racing down the hall stairs around as fast as he had raced up. Very quickly, a number of people followed her, but he had no hurry, himself - there was no doubt going to be a smoochy moment, if he'd heard the night fury call right, and he was in no mood to see it.

When he saw two women headed his way, he scowled at them both and made a bee-line for his sister. She was the only person with girl-bits that he knew who made sense. He couldn't handle the rest right now.

"Let's go get our own dragon from the barn," Ruffnut said with an excited grin. "My softie of a husband raced out there to get his gas monster back. I want mine too."

"You got it," he said, throwing an arm around her and walking out beside her, wiggling a finger at Woodnut.

Screw confusing women and anything to do with them. At least, he had his sister.

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Hiccup's butt was numb. It wasn't even that he hadn't ever sat on a saddle for this long, or that he wasn't used to it. But when Toothless was going for a long trip, he usually went flat on his belly and let the wind resistance push them forward.

This trip was not about speed - they were going at a baby-dragon friendly gait, and he couldn't help cooing at them when they got all excited at the clouds. At least they had sense enough to hold on tight to their parents' backs, and there hadn't been any accidents.

But the problem was, he was holding one of the eggs in his arm still. He'd wrapped himself in fur and clamped it shut at the front, purposefully to keep the tiny sweetling still in the shell well warmed. It was making his sitting position more than a little awkward, however, and it was all but impossible to hold onto his hand controls properly. So his hands and feet were freezing, he was

shivering, but he was sweating under the fur cape, and his butt was numb.

All in all, not the greatest flight of his life. But it was certainly the best one.

Toothless was going to be a dad. A dad. And Hiccup was holding one of the babies. He almost felt as proud as if he'd been the baby-maker.

That brought on a set of images he pushed to the back of his mind for later.

Still, they had been in the air for about seven hours he reckoned, and they were actually farther than he anticipated. It would still take them three hours to Berk, and dawn was quite a few hours away, so they were proceeding entirely by moonlight. Thankfully the dragons knew where they were going, because Hiccup's bearings were slightly off, if his compass said anything.

He leaned slightly to the side, always very careful to hold onto his egg tightly and trying not to slip off. The scraggy rocks and ocean waves were too generic, and a glance upwards didn't help much, seeing as the sky was mottled in bluish clouds. He could barely see any of the guiding stars, and the moon was no help at all, fully round and overpowering all the others.

His eye caught something, and he leaned over again. It was a Viking ship, and Hiccup's face split into a grin, glad to see a friendly face; then he paused. It was rare to see anyone out this time of the cycle. No one would be mad enough to go fishing with the storm they'd just had - all the fish would be at the bottom, or further in-land. And there was no need for boats to come this far out, even if they'd decided to use the Berk Fleet for patrolsâ€|

He remembered some of the recent meetings, and wondered whether it was one of the fleets they'd sent for. Because more and more boats were beginning to take shape, their prows and masts and sails emerging from the colour of the sea into the moonlight when the clouds allowed it. In all, Hiccup counted around thirty ships - about half Berk's fleet.

"Hang on, bud," he said quietly, almost to himself. When they were flying, sometimes the things below them looked like they moved really slowly. He carefully took the spyglass out of his pack, and gripping the egg between his thighs, adjusted the scope, until he â€|

"Shit!" he hissed in alarm. He grabbed the egg tightly, hugging it to himself as he quickly put the spy-glass back in place and flattened himself against the saddle as much as he could. Toothless sensed his urgency. "The moon's almost behind us! Bud, those aren't friendly! UP! Get everyone in the clouds as quietly as you can!"

Toothless gave an urgent snort, and was headed towards the clouds with a powerful wingbeat. The female night fury followed, and Hiccup was thankful to see the other dragons take their cue, following them to the top of the cloud bank. Hiccup could feel himself trembling as he swallowed hard, Toothless levelling his flight and grunting up at him. The egg he was holding in his mouth kept his lips slightly parted, and the dragon rolled his jaw with a grunt and a pointed look

at his human.

"That â€| that was danger, bud." Hiccup swallowed again. "Freyr, I thought, with that storm â€|" He pressed the egg more tightly to his stomach. He was bringing the dragons back, yes, but they were bringing their precious young, sweet little things with innocent eyes, right into danger. And Toothless' sweetlings, still in the egg.

But â€| "This, this is a good thingâ€|" he murmured to himself. They were three hours' flight away from Berk. That meant there were about 12 hours of sailing - half of their masts seemed damaged, and he'd seen the flash of oars. With a favourable wind, they would have made it in 10, but as it was â€| and they were coming from a completely wrong direction. They were being expected from the North West, but they'd either been turned by the storm, or they had turned to avoid it â€| and they were only thirty ships .. the armada counted five hundred.. but what if they had been separated, and there were more? What if they were coming from all directionsâ€|

Toothless groaned again, this time looking at Hiccup sternly.

"Sorry, bud," he said, realising that he wasn't sharing. "Those ships are coming to attack Berk. If you and the other dragons land thereâ€|" Toothless gave a growl. "I thought the storm would smash the fleet! I need to know if there are more, if they're scattered, headed for us â€| and you need to decide if you want to drop me off home and lead all the others â€| away."

He got a knot in his throat just saying it, but it was what was right. All these sweetlingsâ€|

And then he thought of Heather, Woodnut, and Gustav and Dartfoot and Ättta, and how much danger they would be in without the dragons thereâ€| Hiccup rubbed his brow with his free hand, clamping his thighs to hold on.

"Bud, it's up to you." he sighed. "Those ships are headed to Berk. There were only thirty, but there are supposed to be five hundred. I don't know if the others survived â€| I have to check. And I can't do it without you. But you all have little ones. If you want, the others can stop on our old island, and â€| I'll go on. Maybe you can give me a ride and go back. You have â€|" The egg against Hiccup's stomach felt like a weight. "You have a family to take care of now."

Toothless gave him a glare, and then actually growled. The dragon looked over at the other night fury, who gave a warble and a questioning tilt of her head. Toothless pointed his nose at the sky, then, and she gave a happy warble and whizzed away.

"Toothless, whatâ€|?" Hiccup asked worriedly, looking around at the other dragons to see if they were about to follow her. None of them did, all still flying sedately with their tiny, snoozing charges on their backs.

It was a full half-hour before the other night fury returned, holding a wooden plank in her mouth. She glided close, dropping the plank on Toothless' head with amusement and making Hiccup scramble to pick it

up.

"So â€| this is all you found?" He asked the night fury cautiously. She looked triumphant. "Or â€| all you left?" She growled. Hiccup smiled. Toothless preened. "What about the ships we just saw? I didn't hear .. did you take them?"

She snorted this time, growling. Hiccup nodded. Possibly those thirty ships were too well armed, too well organised. They were what was left of a huge fleet, probably taking on as many soldiers and weapons they could take without sinking. A single dragon would have had no chance.

"Good call," Hiccup replied, and Toothless purred. "You have the little ones to come back to. Aaand this great big stud hereâ€|" Toothless huffed. The female gave the choking vocalisation he had come to associate with night fury laughter. "Right. So it's your call, bud. Where do you want to take us. Berk, or our island?"

There was a quiet moment. By now, the dragons had surrounded them, Toothless flying slower as he thought and allowed the other dragons to listen into the conversation. His mouth was full, but he still gave a growl. Every eye in the crowd sharpened to him. Fireworm roared, Stormfly and Clover crowded, flying to flank Toothless' other side. Hiccup waited, looking down at his friend until Toothless's eyes flickered to him with a look the human needed no translation for.

"Oh, bud, I â€| all of youâ€|" The dragons around him answered with various vocalisations.

Loyalty. There was simply no misreading it.

"Right," he said, screwing his head on straight. "We're going to need to fly a little faster. We need to get to Berk as far ahead of these bastards as we can. Wake up your little ones, have them hold on!"

Roars and gargles answered as many tiny eyes blinked awake. The gaggle and cackle and din that went on was a general chittering in the sky, so much like the first time Toothless had taken him into the dragon's den the first time; a terrifying moment of being surrounded by so many dragons and feeling so alone, because even Toothless had been caught in it for a few moments.

Now the feeling couldn't be any more different. These creatures were all deciding to return to Berk with them, to defend it. To defend their home. His home.

Berk was home. Really home. Not just the place he was born in or the place he had to be things in, or the even the place he wished to return to; not anymore. Berk was home. The place where everything was.

The silver pendent clacked against the eggshell when he bent down to stay as flat on Toothless' saddle as possible. Something - someone - within the egg clicked their claws timidly against the shell.

Hiccup's heart lurched. He was going home.

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**Tuffnut, the world's most deadliest weapon! But really, he's so angry here, because his sister has a baby now, and everyone knows that murderous attacks are bad for a baby's digestion and disrupts their nap-time. And then he's all glorious but he gets ignored by his Boggie Girl...

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22. Trust and Love

The epithet of this chapter is very special to me, as I took it from one of the recently written most beautiful novels to be published. I know a film of it is being made â€“ a lovely tribute to originality, as usual â€“ but I won't be watching it. This was the last book I purchased from a great local family book shop of repute in my country, which sold-out and closed down soon after. So, here's to you, Mr Zusak; your novel is special because it's fantastic, and it's special because it's a relic of a by-gone great.

This chapter also contains the final step to the process of reconciliation between our two love birds.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 20 - Trust and Love_

**Not leaving: an act of trust and love, often deciphered by children.**

â€• _**Markus Zusak**_

Even with their increased speed, they didn't make it to Berk for another hour. By the time they arrived, it was the darkest hour of the night, but the moon had not set yet and Hiccup could still mostly see what he was doing as he moved around on Toothless' saddle, trying to get a glimpse with his spy glass.

The ships were too far behind to see now, which was really good, and the sea stacks around Berk were beginning to appear with greater and greater frequency, so his homeland wasn't far behind. His heart began to pick up despite himself; he had never been so excited to see Berk's shores again which were suddenly rising up from the sea and filling out on the opposite horizon.

This was what it should have felt, months ago, when he returned home after years' absence. What it would have felt like had he left on good terms, had his trip really been a coming-of-age voyage as half the archipelago thought. He would have been glad to see home, then; to see the beloved and ever familiar shores of rest, peace and comfort approaching him with arms opening on the sea line.

Instead it had been fear and tension then, agitation, and a terrible sickness in his stomach that he was returned to the place where he was nothing and he was nobody. It had been an ache at the back of his mind, in the middle of his chest, just as his stump was now; an ache that had followed him for five years, reminding him even in his happier moments that his father didn't love him, that she would never look at him, and that he was more useful to his dear home gone that he had ever been.

The recent months had been a strong irritating medicine, the type that makes the sickness erupt first before it was eradicated. Pus had simmered in his chest as his every doubt and fear came to light, came to the surface. His inadequacies, his clumsy tendencies, and the steadfast belief that he was worth nothing to Berk and in Berk had all erupted on the skin of his heart like so many boils, aching painfully any time they were even lightly brushed by the breeze of thoughts.

He hadn't really realised when they'd begun to heal. Maybe when he spoke to Astrid that night, when she'd come looking for forgiveness after their quarrel. Maybe it was when he spoke in the meetings, as himself, his father looking at him with open approval. Maybe it was those moments in the shed with Astrid, so close and so beautiful, warm against her lips and in her arms, like balm on a wound long aching.

Or maybe it was before that - his first real conversation with his father in so many years, one with true communication that hadn't happened since before he left. Waking up with Astrid tending to him, instead of a foreign woman he did not know, who spoke a strange language and did strange things. Maybe it was just the day to day, living and breathing Berk, and the people around him bringing him honey and cider and herbs, complementing and taking pride in his little steps down the hill as he got used to his prosthetic, instead of criticising his every stumble.

Maybe it was better that he was feeling this now; that he had felt such different, horrible feelings the first time he'd returned to Berk, all those months ago that felt like a blink and an eternity. Now he could compare, he had two homecomings to put one next to the other, like two halves of a log, and they couldn't be more different. This time, he was going back to Berk because he wanted to, not because he felt he had to. He had his father and Astrid waiting, together with many friends. He had a feeling of anticipation - happiness - to see the green rolling hills, the scraggy rocks and the chill mountaintops capped in snow. He didn't feel the fear of discovery, the shadow of failure palling every one of his actions. It was ok if he stumbled, even if he fell. Suddenly, he just realised - as if someone had slapped him with it - that there would be someone to catch him, or to pick him back up. And even though Toothless had been that in the last five years, this was different. Finally, Hiccup Haddock had carved himself a space in the village of Berk. It wasn't a role on the outside anymore, like the moon roaming far up in the sky, living in the clouds and never touching the ground. It wasn't a big space - he didn't want one, and he tended to fit in small spaces. But Hiccup Haddock now was a part of Berk, one of its grass blades, and he decided that he wanted to keep it that way.

Somehow, in that old house on his island, his definition of 'freedom' had suddenly changed. It had suddenly become the freedom to choose.

And at the end of the day, it hadn't really been a hard choice.

Toothless' egg was warm against his stomach. This felt like a new sort of freedom, too.

Berk's shores began coming up fast, and the dragons around him dived before he began feeling the kick at the back of his head when Toothless tilted forward and they began their descent. Berk was almost pitch black, but waving, quivering lights were beginning to dot the blacker-than-black that was Berk proper, and he knew they'd been spotted. Braziers began to come alight, and more of Berk began to be illuminated.

The female night fury let out a roar, starting off a bevy of chitters and growls from the other dragons assembled. His stomach rose to meet his throat in the familiar weightless sensation of landing before Toothless' wings furled out, the protection of the precious egg making Hiccup take most of the hit.

"It's the dragons, they're back!" someone yelled as the wavering torches grew nearer, and the braziers grew brighter. Hiccup blinked at them, his legs slightly unsteady as they always were after a long flight as he slid off the saddle.

"And it's Hiccup! Thor be praised, it's Hiccup!"

"He's fine! He's alive! Someone tells Stoick- Someone tell Astrid!"

The crowd began gathering around him, all of them happily congratulating him for being alive, and he dizzily realised that his half-formed plan would have worked - they had really believed he had died in the storm.

Oh. They'd believed he'd died in the storm. His dad, and Astridâ€¦

The female night fury began to sidle up beside him, jolting away anyone who came too close and growling at them, the Hooligans only jumping away, looking slightly miffed and calling her 'Toothless', but Hiccup was too tired to correct them with a name she didn't yet have. Said male dragon just looked on in apparent elation as his lover jerked full grown Vikings around like rag dolls to get to their egg, which Hiccup surrendered gratefully to her as the crowd got thicker.

"Hiccup!"

His head snapped around, and he had an armful of Astrid before he could steady himself, their dragons saving them from a fall.

"Astrid, Astrid, sorry it took me so long," he heard himself babble as her face dove into his neck. "But it's before Snoggletog, so I kept that promise, and â€¦ It's before, right?"

Gods, had he been counting the days right? He'd not been in the old hut that long, right?

"I, oh gosh, I justâ€!"

She grabbed his face and kissed him, hard. His legs, just used to being on the ground again, took on their wobbly-kneed stance for completely different reasons as her tongue took a holiday with his. Gods, what had he been thinking, worrying about this when it was soâ€!

Toothless gave a warble and their mouths detached with a wet pop, and then the jeering and laughter of the rest of the tribe around them came to his attention like someone had taken cloth out of his ears.

"Son!" His father's booming voice reached him, and he looked around Astrid's head to see him coming up with Gobber, Spitelout, Bertha, Brawlnife and Wolftooth and the other chiefs.

The chiefs. The thing.

The ships.

"Astrid?" he asked, ducking his head into her neck, holding her as tightly as he could against his hard armour.

"Yes?" she replied, her breath on his neck making him shiver.

"Remember when I promised you later?" he went on quickly as his father navigated the crowd. "It's soon. Real soon. But right now â€!"

He felt lips on his neck, and it was all he could do not to do something embarrassing.

"Go," she murmured. He moved away from her. The look in her eyes was rational, cool, collected. She was thinking, quietly and quickly. There was also so much â€! trust, there.

He felt like a worm for even having thought about â€! leaving. Still, there was one thing he could do; offer. He could offer all he had, and spend whatever time he had to make that trust stay there. If she took him up on it â€!

He'd know, later. Bolstered by the emotion in Astrid's eyes, the feeling of having her at his back as well as Toothless, he turned to look at his father.

Stoick stopped the moment he caught sight of him, the smile melting off his face. Apparently, either he looked frightful, or serious enough to get his point across.

"Dad, call everyone to the hall. We need to talk. Now."

Stoick nodded. The crowd around him was jubilant with the return of the beloved missing members of their community, and all the new darlings, some of whom could barely walk. Hiccup was almost sad; he wished this had happened at a different time, so that he could have just sat back and enjoyed this. His heart tugged when he remembered the tiny one he'd cradled for the whole trip, and how he wished he could just stop time so that he could take a moment to be happy for

Toothless.

But it wasn't happening. Not yet, anyway.

Later. It had better damn happen, later.

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Letting him walk with his father was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. All she wanted to do was drag him to a secluded spot, forget the world for a few hours and let herself drown in the fact that he was alive.

She hadn't even told him he'd kept his promise. Snoggletog was tomorrow.

"Astrid!" She turned around to find Fishlegs coming up to her quickly, holding ¦ oh lord, Stormfly!

By the time Fishlegs made it through the gaggle of people around her, Stormfly had had a much easier time jostling folk out of her way, and the brilliant blue nadder lowered herself as three little wide-eyed babies gave Astrid beady, excited looks. clover moved in, lending the tinies his tail so they could come down without toppling, and there was a gaggle of cackles and chirps from all around the plaza as people laughed and held the fledglings in their arms. Astrid was no better, the tiny ones trying to climb all over her as she tried to keep all three in her arms; they were no larger than her forearms.

"I can't believe it, look at all the little babies!" Fishlegs said enthusiastically. Some of them can even fly! Look at this little guy!" One of Meatlug's babies was butting into the large man's shoulder, looking adoringly at the blond man as it tried to land on his back, scrabbling against his fur and making tiny little squeaks and pops. Ruffnut came up next, her zippleback following with Tuffnut on Fart's head, a baby zippleback curled up on his helmet.

"Yeah," she said, looking around at the village milling in the early morning. The sun wasn't even due for another few hours yet, but everyone was out, even the little children. Åtta was racing after Hiss, the terror apparently returning childless, but almost more energetic than it had left as the little girl laughed and ran after him. There was an air of general joy, laughter and various dragon vocalisations in the air, as if the holiday had come a day early.

Hiccup's face, though ¦ and- wait a minute.

"Toothless?" she asked, looking in askance at the night fury that trotted up to her, giving her experimental sniffs. There was something odd about him, something ¦ "You're not Toothless!"

The night fury blinked, and Astrid just stared for a moment as the mirror image walked up, only the one who'd been sniffing at her had brilliant, glacier blue eyes. Both of them had their mouth ajar, and Toothless, she realised, was slightly larger. This dragon seemed to be immensely curious, eyes as dilated as they would go as she gave Toothless a sniff first, and then Astrid. Then she turned to the various humans around, sniffing them eagerly as if she were an

excited six year old being shown into the shop of a toy wood-cutter.

"You night furies don't eat people, right?" Fishlegs asked, and Toothless gave him a nonplussed look that belonged squarely on Hiccup's face.

"I think she's just excited," Astrid said placatingly, looking down at the fidgeting little dragons in her arms that were somehow staying still enough not to fall. Astrid gave the two furies a judging look. "So what about you guys, then? I don't think you found yourself a girlfriend just to compare wing-spans!"

"You think that's a female?!" Fishlegs asked, that sheen of manic excitement Astrid knew well sliding over his face. He and Hiccup were terrible together, but she somehow couldn't help wanting to see more of it. Exchanging a look with Ruff, she knew it the other woman felt the same - though Fishlegs probably got clobbered for it a great deal.

"Don't see what else she can be, huh girl?" Stormfly gave a warble Astrid knew to be a yes, and that was all the answer she needed. "So, what is it, Toothless. Still trying to convince her you're a good catch?" And the indignation on his face was priceless. It really was like talking to Hiccup sometimes. She watched in amusement as he tottered up to her, then lowered his head and dropped something terribly wet and slimy on her boot. "Och, Tooth- Toothless!"

He licked his lips, looking relieved as he yawned, and the female came up and did the same. Two slimy, jet-black eggs with marble-like flecks were decorating her boots, soaking the fur through at the top. Astrid felt excitement bloom within her too. Night fury eggs. Night fury hatchlings!

"Does Hiccup know about this? Of course he knows about this - oh, can I tell someone about this?!" Fishlegs suddenly gushed. Astrid's eyes widened and she hit Fishlegs with the only thing available to her; her face.

"I get that he can be annoying," Ruffnut said in mild amusement, looking down at the knocked out man with gronkle babies blinking at him in puzzlement. "But why did you headbutt my husband?"

"We need to keep this shut tight. All of us." She looked around them sternly, quickly putting the nadder babies back on Stormfly and Clover before picking an egg up and wrapping a cloak around herself. Ruffnut, sensing the urgency, kicking Fishlegs awake, filched his jacket and did the same with the other egg. Fishlegs blinked, looking confused and slightly annoyed. "Everyone's taken up with their own dragons - people don't seem to have noticed there are two of Toothless yet. We have to keep that hushed. Come on," she said gently, addressing the goofball of a black dragon, who was lolling his tongue at her as he looked insistently between her face and his hidden egg. "Why don't we get you two comfortable in the dragon barns, shall we? You can take care of them better there. You too, Stormfly. I'm sure I can get Hoark to keep Fireworm with her mate tonight."

"Why all the secrecy?" Tuffnut asked, still following on his zippleback, which did an excellent job of hiding the fact that there

were two night furies between the darkness and his bulk as they exited the plaza.

"Do you have any idea what people would do, to have a night fury as a dragon?" Astrid hissed, holding the egg tighter to herself. Something inside gave a tiny tap, and she shuddered at the feeling. "We are going to be training people next spring. Odds are, every single one will want a night fury if they know there are any available at all. These are Toothless' children; I'm not letting anyone lay claim on them before they're even out of the shell."

"Makes sense," Fishlegs said reluctantly. He bit his lip. "But can I take notes about their habits, and how long it takes for the eggs to hatch, and â€¢!"

"Fish," Ruffnut drawled, "breathe."

"I can't say yes to any of that, you know that," Astrid replied as they entered the barn. Toothless moved ahead, scratching at the stone he usually slept on as the female gave it an approving sniff. The pair flamed it up together and then curled up, body to body. Astrid put the egg down between them with a smile, and once Ruff had put the other, the two dragons extended a wing over each other and curled up into a knot of seemingly never ending limbs. Stormfly and Clover took up the two other stalls, the tiny ones flopping into the hay and quickly curling up. Too much excitement for little heads, it would seem. "I think as far as that goes, Hiccup will have it covered. Toothless is his family, after all."

"Well, part of it," Fishlegs conceded, though he kept sneaking both dragon families interesting peeks. Astrid nodded, smiling in thanks.

"Hey guys?"

"And I'm sure he'll let you in on the notes. I mean, with all the dragons coming back with their young, he'll have his hands fully taking notes on them all."

"Guys?"

"True," Ruff replied. "You're going to have your hands full yourself, husband - I'm not scooping up baby gronkle shit. I deal with Woodnut shit. That's more than enough."

"Well, if you put it that wayâ€¢"

"GUYS!"

They blinked at one another and peeked out of the barn, where Tuffnut had remained on Flat-Fart.

"What do you want?" Ruff asked.

"Oh, nothing important," he replied in annoyance. "Only to tell you that everyone has moved to the Great Hall. And I mean everyone everyone. There's no one left outside."

"I didn't hear any horns?" Fishlegs said, though it was more of a

question as he looked at the two women.

"Maybe it was passed on by word. Come on," Astrid said worriedly. Hiccup's tense, serious expression returned to the forefront of her mind and she raced forward, trusting the others to follow and frowning up at Tuffnut as he yelled 'Losers!' down at them, flying off on Flat-Fart.

"Idiot!" she hissed, but hurried on.

The Hall was full to the brim when she arrived, barely any space between human and dragon. There was a fuzzy din of hushed whispering - as hushed as it got with a bunch of Vikings in the room - but the mood had certainly shifted. The looks on people's faces now were worried, and the groans and murmurs urgent and frustrated.

Astrid elbowed her way in none-too-gently, trying to catch a word of what they were saying. Danger, attack, pre-emptive strike. The pit of her stomach gave a summersault the more she heard. People began moving away from her as the yelps of pain of those who didn't do it fast enough began to get louder, and by the time she was in front, she could see that the chiefs were sitting at a table facing the people, discussing things among themselves and among those at the front of the crowd. She quickly crossed the small space between the first people and the table, sidling up to Hiccup. He was absorbed in what was being said, but as soon as she pressed against him, an arm came around her waist almost unconsciously.

It was a nice feeling. She wished she had a moment to savour it properly. She'd been wishing that a lot, recently.

"Toothless and his friend are ok. I put them in the stable - out of sight," she muttered to him. Stoick and Brawlnife's voices rose in the background and Hiccup listened to them before he turned his eyes to her.

"Thanks," he whispered back. The crowd in front of them erupted. Astrid fisted a hand around Hiccup's buckles.

"Hiccup, what's going on?" she asked urgently. His eyes turned to her again.

"Berseker ships. I spotted some headed straight for us, filled with soldiers to the brim. There are at least two hundred of them."

"Ships?" she asked, panic blooming in her throat.

"No," he replied urgently. "Berserkers, on those ships. Toothless' mate either took care of the rest, or there was just debris left, but I think that's all that left of their armada."

"Oh Frigga's oats," Astrid said, eyes widening. She shuddered as she realised what, exactly, the looming threats and worries in hushed whispers between the heirs had been about. "They were coming with the armada? They were going to attack Berk?!"

"You didn't know?" Hiccup asked, his arm tightening around her. "I thought my dad would tell you!"

"I think he probably assumed you had, master scatter brain," she replied with some annoyance, rubbing her forehead.

"Oh, yeah," he replied sheepishly. She shook her head. "Still, they're a good few hours away - the thirty ships left are still pretty banged up, and they were using oars."

"How is it that since you came back, we've always had fore-warning of an attack?" she asked, looking up at him cheekily. He gave her preening look.

"The gods must like me," he replied sarcastically. "They throw dung in my face, but at least they send me a written invitation first."

"Famous last words!"

"Oi!"

"We can't do that!"

They were startled out of their hushed conversation by someone shouting from the crowd.

"What folly is this, letting them land and then taking them? We should grab the dragons and go sink those rotten bastards right now."

"That's true! Light them on fire while they're still on the deeps, and let Ras take care of them!"

"Why should we give them time to land on Berk and cause havoc?"

"We cannot know," Stoick began, silencing most of the shouts, "what weaponry they have. Would you risk your lives and the lives of our dragons if they have harpoons or catapults? My son could not risk a close look, not without endangering all of our dragons. And they have their young to protect, too."

"Stoick's right," Bertha said reluctantly. "I want to go out there and smash'em. But if I know that mad bastard, he has something up his sleeve even if almost all his fleet is gone. He wouldn't still be headed this way."

"But he's utterly deranged," Wolftooth said with a shrug. "He could just be headed on the course because he wants to go up in a flaming effigy of crisp-boned maddness."

"I know, but I don't want to take the chance." Stoick rubbed his face. "We just got our dragons back, all of us. Even if we managed to convince them to go out to battle with us, they're tired after a nine-hour flight. We don't know how long we have- Hiccup, how long do we have?"

"At least ten hours," he answered. "They should start showing on the horizon, then. They didn't spot us, I'm sure of that, but I don't think we have any more than ten hours. They're coming from the South, not the North West. They either got turned around, or they were rowing. They won't be here before ten hours."

"At least the dragons should be able to rest," Thuggory said, looking down at Fanghorn, who was snoring sonorously.

"Very well," Stoick said tiredly. "Hiccup, lad. I need to talk to you; then I'll let you get an hour's sleep. Which you will take." Stoick gave him a look when he opened his mouth. "You too, Astrid." It was her turn to be quelled by a look. She was sure her mother was still hunting her down to try to medicate her in one way or another. Curse the day the Goethi had taken her on as assistant quack.

"Alright," Hiccup sighed. Astrid heard the timber in his voice, the nasal quality of it deeper than usual. He was really tiredâ€¦

"I'll go to the hall. Get things readied up for a rest," she said, moving away.

She heard him call after her, but she ignored it for the moment. She really needed to go to the hall, put some fresh linen out, and hope that he wouldn't mind sharing upstairs with her - they could discuss the permanence of it later, but for now, she really wished to sleep that soundly.

Still, there was one other place she needed to go first.

She rushed there quickly, cutting through the village and the woods as fast as she could run, some of her muscles still aching badly from her exposure to the cold and her inability to sit still with so much to do. She tripped a few times, her coordination still not back to its optimal levels, but she arrived at her shrine as quickly as she could.

The sun was just beginning to rise, a white-gold glow on the edge of the horizon as it all went pink and orange. It looked like it would be overcast and grey later, but sunset and sunrise were always the time when Berk looked at its best. Her shrine could have been glowing, for all the hues that were being born around it. The new halo of tree leaves supporting the rise looked black against the light, and the stone, still dew-wet, looked like it had been there forever, and would remain there till Ragnarok took everything away, Mjolnir figures still clicking against its sides in the short bursts of breeze.

Astrid approached it carefully, the terrain still seeming new and unsteady under her feet despite the fact that it was only minimally altered. She couldn't shake off the feeling of that night, when the water churned beneath her and the wind tried to assist it in gobbling her up. So she knelt down besides the pile of stones, held together by leather thongs and moss and prayer, and laid her hand palm down on it.

"Thank you," she whispered, looking over the stones at the rising sun, branches of leaves mirroring the branches of light, both reaching up into the sky. For that single moment, Astrid allowed herself to feel; happiness, relief - so much relief - and a bone-tired weariness that came from the last few days of racing against everything the gods threw at them.

They weren't even done yet.

Astrid paused for a few minutes, her palm still on the shrine as the sun climbed up higher. She'd go when it was half-way up, but for now, she just wanted a moment of peace, so her insides could catch up with her outsides. It was peaceful, quiet and beautiful, the ocean waves below a lullaby instead of a roaring beast.

"Hey."

She jerked, realising she'd almost fallen asleep with her eyes open. She turned around to find Hiccup, standing just at the tree-line, resting bodily against a trunk.

"Dad told me I'd find you hereâ€|" He looked around, and then slid down the tree with an oomph, sitting splay legged and looking exhausted. He needed to rest in a clean bed.

"I'll come back with you," she said with a smile, rising and walking towards him. She offered a hand, which he took, but he began tugging at it insistantly instead of rising, and wouldn't relent until she sat. He kept giving her a closed mouthed smile, a constant gaze he almost didn't blink through, which kept her silent.

"No need," he replied, brushing her hair out of her eyes. "It's Later."

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Astrid blinked at him tiredly for a moment, and he just had time to notice her frazzled braid, her halo of unkept hair sticking up in odd directions as he'd never seen it. Her eyes were bloodshot, the skin around it puffy. She looked completely tired out.

He knew he'd said they would talk after the Thing, that they would need to wait until they had proper time, but now â€| he wasn't sure if they had till tomorrow.

He turned to look at the pile of stones he'd found her beside. His father had told him he would find her in this spot, close enough to Raven's Point he could see hear the birds on the wind. The sun was rising, tendrils of watery light trying to filter into the dense post-storm air and managing very ill indeed as some cloud banks got in its way before it had even been birthed by the sea.

It was a mound of stones and rocks, piled on top of one another and woven into a net of what looked like leather strips. The waves beat against the rocks in a steady rhythm, and the breeze was strong; the clicks caught his attention.

"What's that?" he asked, nodding towards the rock pile. Astrid looked behind her, then bit her lip and hid her face in his chest. He'd removed some of his armour and gone into the hall, just in case his father had been wrong, only to find it empty. He'd started a fire and filled in a tub for her; now she wouldn't have to do it. The walk here had been almost more than he could endure, however, as his stump was throbbing in a vicious, continuous manner, feeling tight and hot against the sock and wooden cup around it.

She didn't answer for a while, and he was too tired to fight her. He curled his hands around her back, pressing his finger pads into her tense back through her clothing as he breathed her in. Her hair smelt

fantastic, of honey and sweat, and the air around them was fresh, crisp, but almost didn't smell like Winter anymore. The sunlight finally reached their spot, bathing them in that watery golden glow that reminded him of that morning, months ago, when she'd called his name and tipped his world slightly sideways.

"Astrid," he said, nudging her slightly. If she had fallen asleep, they had a problem. He was in no shape to carry her back to the village not with his leg, but he didn't have the heart to wake her. He didn't fancy sleeping out here, but Toothless was understandably reluctant about leaving those eggs, so the grass would be his pillow. At least he would be hers; that wasn't a bad prospect in life. Hiccup Haddock, occupation: Astrid's pillow.

She sighed against his chest, however, raising her head to look up at him.

"You will not laugh at me. Or make fun of me. Or be weirded out. You are not allowed to be weirded out. Understood?"

Hiccup blinked, weirded out already, and she slapped his chest. He snorted, trying to contain the corners of his mouth as he nodded reverently. She hit his chest again.

"So you're just going to hit me now when you don't want to answer a question?" he asked, nonplussed. "Is this the way it's going to be? 'Astrid, what's for dinner?' And off goes the right hook!"

"Ever the jester," she mocked playfully. She nudged his side with a finger, making him twitch. Her face lit up, and he quickly grabbed both of her hands.

"Don't you dare," he said with trepidation.

"I had forgotten you were ticklish," she said, eyes bright and predatory. She tried to loosen her grip, but he held on tight. "Oh come on, for old times' sake?"

"Nope, not happening," he replied, trying to contain the tears as she twisted his wrists viciously to try to get away. "Although I would appreciate it if you could not break my wrists. Before a battle. I tend to need those."

Astrid huffed, her shoulders sagging with an eyeroll as she relented. "Fine," she said, her voice only moderately amused. Hiccup sighed too, sorry to have reminded her of their impending situation. "I still have to tell you, too, huh?"

"What?" Hiccup asked, lacing his fingers with hers so that he could stop her from going for a sneak attack, while at the same time sneakily stroking her hands with his thumbs himself.

"I forgot because we stopped being friends," she said, her voice so low he could barely hear it over the soft noise of waves far below. "And we stopped being friends becauseâ€¦ well, becauseâ€¦"

"Hey, we've been over that." he said with a sigh, clearing his throat when a ball of dread settled there. His hand still held hers as she sat on his knees with her knees curled at his waist, so he gently put his forehead against hers. "Let me go first, OK?"

She blinked at him. "I thought you'd try to delay as long as possible."

"I would," he said, sighing and closing his eyes, almost scared to look at her as he said this. His heart had already begun to pick up speed, a strange taste in his mouth as if impending heartache had settled on his palate. But he'd look her in the face for this; she deserved that, at least. He opened his eyes. "I learned that it's useless to delay. The bite at the end just takes more strength."

"Ok," she replied. She looked almost as worried as he was - it both fed the panic racing in the pit of his chest and made him feel better, to think that she valued all this too. But it also meant there was more to hurt, and more to loseâ€|. Ok. No more delaying.

"Ok," he repeated, swallowing hard to remove the embarrassing squeak in his voice. "So I've said I've done a few things I wasn't proud of â€| um, let's start with the fighting stuff. Right. So I learned to fight."

"So you stopped being Hiccup the drops-a-weapon," she teased with an encouraging smile. "What's to be ashame of?"

"How. And why," he breathed. He let his head fall back against the tree trunk, looking up at the leaves. The sun's glow was up half the trunk, but the leaves were still in darkness and the contrast was blinding. "I told you that I've traded in the Eastern Capital, right?" He saw her nod in his peripheral vision. "Well, while I was there on trade, the city was shut down because it was attacked by a people called the Goths. Toothless was stuck outside, I was stuck inside, and â€| we found each other, eventually, but I couldn't just leave." He swallowed. This was becoming easier as he spoke, his hands and fingers caressing her warm palms. "So â€| I stayed. After the whole thing with the Picts, I never brought Toothless into battle with me - I didn't want people to know what I could do with dragons, and I wasn't about to put us both in danger. But I was already pretty handy with a sword from a few lessons I'd paid for, and â€|"

"Go on," she said, resting her cheek against his collar.

"I killed â€| quite a few people," he choked out. "They were brutal, took no quarters. They didn't breach the city walls, but the lower town â€| there were the poor there. Mothers and children, and those who didn't make it inside the fortifications. I had some allies with me, they were called Saracens - and I know this isn't an excuse but â€| They were ferocious and bloodthirsty. And in the heat of it, I ended up enjoying it. I started out protecting the others but â€| by the end of it, one of them stripped off his clothes and ran out the walls, killing every one of the enemy soldiers in sight. He even cut off this man's head and drank the blood while the head was still blinking."

Bile rose to his throat and he swallowed it down harshly.

"I laughed, with the others," he went on hoarsely. "And I know we're Vikings but â€|"

"It's fine," Astrid murmured. "I understand. The fact that you feel this now means you're no worse a person than you were before."

"I beg to differ," he said thickly.

"Do you think I'm heartless?" she asked. He reacted with predictable indignation on her behalf - which she was probably counting on. "Well, I used to enjoy killing dragons. Your father too. It used to give me a thrill, to see their blood spilling, know it's them and not me this time."

Hiccup blinked down at her, unsure what to say. The only thought made his stomach turn, and he knew that, with him gone, someone was going to face that nightmare in the ring. With Astrid being an accomplished warrior, there was little chance that she hadn't killed; then and since.

"Do I disgust you?" she said quietly, and there was real fear in her eyes.

"Never," he replied quickly. She swallowed as thickly as he had.

"Because I look at Toothless, and Stormfly, and Åtta with her terror, and I know I was as good as killing children in their sleep. Sure, they were sharp-toothed, fire-breathing children, but they still were innocent. They didn't even raid us because they wanted to."

They sat in silence for a moment, looking at one another.

"I don't hold it against you. You didn't know, and it was kill or be killed," Hiccup replied. Astrid nodded sadly.

"You were in battle, too. It's brutal; makes you do things you'd never thought you could. Hiccup, it will probably happen again, for the both of us." She looked at him worriedly, both of them thinking and trying not to think of what else would climb the horizon in a few hours, after the sun.

He nodded. His stomach got into more knots. "And I was fighting because I had something of my own to protect."

"Sephia?" Astrid asked, her voice thin. He nodded.

"She wasn't in the city. Thank the gods she'd decided to stay behind some weeks before, but she was in a village close enough that they would have felt the backlash; she'd just started a new life, and if the battle had spilt over, I â€¢!"

Astrid was looking up at him, white as a ghost, gnawing at her bottom lip.

"You cared for her," she said, sounding strangled. "It's normal."

"It's not evenâ€¢!" Oh, oh Gods. How was he going to explain this? How was he going to say what they had and hadn't been, when he barely understood it himself? It had been a strange place, between them, no place and every place at once. He swallowed hard, biting his lip as

panic made his breath come in short. "We â€|"

He closed his eyes, and took a deep breathe.

"We were lovers," he said, his heartbeat rushing in his ears as all the horror of her many possible reactions blanketed his mind. "But not really. We shared a bed, I â€|"

He closed his eyes, his cheeks flaming as his throat dried out of words. He hadn't finished, he was so far from having aired all the sins, but he couldn't get past this one without her reaction. He'd had a lover; he wasn't sure if he was ok with it, knowing now that he'd been engaged to her, so he couldn't imagine what Astrid was feeling.

"You mean â€| only one?" she asked. Her tone was strange and jarring, dissonant with all the ones he had been expecting. "You only had one lover?"

Hiccup blinked at her. "What?" he asked, unable to process her question.

"I thought â€| I mean, with you cutting your ties with Berk, and travelling the world, I'd assumedâ€|" Her face went crimson as she shrugged, looking up at him through her lashes. Her fingers clamped down on his hand, and he realised he needed to relent his grip, even as hers went into creaky-bone territory. Her words took a moment to register, and he wasn't sure whether to be flattered or indignant when they did.

"What, you took me for one-in-each-port kind of guy?" he asked, and it was the indignation that came through. She huffed at him, tugging at his hands, her sheepishness melting away as a frown took over. She jolted him with her shoulder; apparently she was unwilling to let his hands go. Good sign. His stump gave a spasm at being jarred, but he ignored it as best he could. His head felt stuffy and confused, his teeth on edge from everything that was hanging on the balance.

"No, but I just thought that â€| well, most men would have had â€| a few more." Astrid looked down, her cheeks still highly coloured and looking like a peach with the sunlight behind her illuminating the fine hairs on her skin. The golden disk was slowly climbing up from the sea over her shoulder, their precious time trickling away.

"Not that you hadn't noticed, with all this so close," he replied sarcastically, pointing at himself with his chin. "but I don't usually fall under the category of 'most men'." He took a long breath, letting it out through his teeth. "...So, anyway, that's â€| better than you expected, I guess?"

"I â€| I'm not sure if it's better or worse," she replied, sounding lost.

"That's reassuring," he groaned.

"I - It's just that â€| if you had only one, it must have â€| she must have been, I mean, really important â€|" She bit her lip and looked away.

Gods, oh gods, she'd gone there. Forseti, please, let this come out

right.

"Astrid, I â€| it's not likeâ€| It â€|" How was he going to say this? How? He'd thought about it ten thousand times, dreaded it, gone cold at it, but he'd somehow never remembered to prepare himself, to try to form a coherent way to tell her.

"You don't have to justify yourself," she said quickly. Too quickly. "You didn't know, about the arrangement I mean." It was back to being 'the arrangement'. Oh gods. "I know that she was the most beautiful woman on Midgard to you, and I don't mean to measure up, or replace her, I just â€|"

His insides stopped in a puddling mess of confusion. What? What?

"I'm holding her," he said, his voice reedy, because he couldn't quite get his lungs to work. He felt dizzy.

"What?" she asked, sounding just as confused as he felt.

"The most beautiful woman on Midgard. I'm holding her," he repeated. Astrid gaped like a hooked fish for a few moments before snarling.

"I'm warning you. Don't shit with me, Hiccup Haddock. Don't lie to make me feel better. You can do many things that I'll forgive, but treating me like an idiot isn't one of them."

"I'm not!" he insisted vehemently, his breath coming short. "I, look, I- when I â€|" He swallowed several times, closing his eyes and trying to make his mind think.

Astrid's forehead came up against his again, and he opened his eyes, her face close enough to make him move back to look at her.

"Breathe," she commanded, though her voice was worried and tender. It made his chest leap harder before he nodded, making an effort to slow his breathing as he blinked at the sunrise, now almost completely free of the water.

"When I met Sepha," he started, pausing to clear his voice when it cracked. "I was bleeding out on the grass, somewhere in the hills of Albion, after the Picts had given me this," he twitched his cheek, "and the rest of the pretty scars on my chest. She dragged me to her tent and medicated me, and â€| I think I would have died if she hadn't. They'd left me for dead."

He paused, trying to gather his thoughts, trying to find a way to say this properly. Astrid squeezed his hands in encouragement.

"She didn't speak a word of Norse, and I had no idea what on earth she was babbling. Somehow we got by â€| I guess I'd grown used to reading body language with Toothless, and it came in handy. I .. she â€|"

How was he going to say this?

"She followed the armies. She'd only just started doing it because

her family had all been wiped out with an illness, and she had no way of surviving otherwise. She told me this later, when we managed to say a few things to one another, and â€|"

How?

"She had â€| blonde hair, like yours, and Iâ€|" His mouth opened a few times before he continued. "I'd never been with anyone. She hadn't really wanted to be what she was, and when she â€|" he squeezed his eyes shut. "I didn't refuse her when she â€| offered."

How?

"Her hair was a similar colour to yours, and when I woke up the first time, I couldn't see well, and for a little while, I thought it was you. I kept .. saying your name and by the time I'd come to, she knew that Iâ€|"

He shrugged. Astrid wasn't saying anything, and he didn't dare look at her.

"She had been married, before the sickness took it all away. When I had recovered, she told me she would teach me. So that I couldâ€|" his cheeks flamed. He couldn't finish the sentence. But he had to finish the thought. "I never thought I'd have- never thought I'd be with you, Astrid. Not then, and I hardly believe it now." He winced. "If you'll still have me, that is, now that
â€|"

"Hiccupâ€|"

"Please let me finish," he cut her off, the words now almost begging to leave his mouth. Now that he'd started telling her, he couldn't stop. "I didn't just sleep with her, Astrid. We sort of had an agreement, Sepha and I and â€| I thought of you the whole time."

It came out in a rush, his throat clogging with shame the moment he said it. He couldn't look her in the face at all, turning to look at the grass he was sitting on. Her hands in his froze. "I didn't know I was engaged to you, I didn't even think I would even ever see you again back then. I was just this â€| fifteen year old â€| lust-filled â€|" he couldn't finish it, the blood rising to his ears further and clouding his head. "I shamed you, so badly, Astrid."

His breathing felt loud in his ears, though his heartbeat was turning almost everything else into fuzzy noises. She had gone rigid, her hands in his still and tense, nails digging into the soft tissue between his knuckles.

"How long didâ€|"

"Months," he bit off. "Almost a year."

"And, every time, you â€|"

He nodded, quite unable to speak anymore. He didn't want to tell her that Sepha had thought of her husband in the same way - somehow, it felt like an excuse, like trying to lessen his sin to her. She had barely ever spoken to him before he left, barely looked his way, but

his mind had been full of her as he slept with Sepha. He'd made love to Astrid for months, without her knowledge or consent.

The quiet was choking him. "Please." It came out in a hiss. "Say something."

She shifted, still stiff as she sat on his knees, nails still cocked into his knuckles painfully.

"Hiccupâ€|" she started, voice thin, but with a certain quality to it that made his stomach lurch. "A man's fantasies are his own," she said kindly.

Oh gods. "Yes, but not like this," he replied, still unable to look at her, his chin touching his chest.

"Hiccup. Please, look at me," she said, almost as if she could read his mind. He forced his head up, never able to deny her anything, especially now. Her face was a mask of confusion and uncertainty, and her cheeks were still flushed red. "Look, I â€| I won't pretend it isn't weird. It's weird. You were sleeping with another woman and thinking of me while you were â€| yeah." She didn't shudder. Hiccup chose to take it as a good sign. She was the one looking away now, and Hiccup simply could not take his eyes off every twitch, every minute movement, trying to decipher what she was thinking.

"Do I disgust you?" he echoed, looking at her steadily. When her eyes snapped to his, he felt all the blood drain from his face as he waited. The answer was yes. He was sure the answer was yes.

"Never," she repeated, though her voice was wavering and unsure, and it was like she'd kicked him in the chest.

"You don't need to lie," he forced out.

"I'm not," she replied, her brow furrowing. "I just â€| it's different. Not what I thought at all. And strange and a littleâ€|" she floundered for a word, and in the end just gave an eloquent, uncomfortable shrug. "But I guessâ€| if you'd known we were engaged, it would be different. I could get angry, then, and say it was an excuse â€| but you didn't. And it's strange but â€|" her cheeks went redder. "I guess, it's no different than some things I thought. I just never- I mean I couldn't- act on them."

"Act on â€|" he choked, not sure he'd understood.

"You and I and- " Another eloquent shrug. "When Ruff got married, I got let into the purifying bath because I was engaged to the son of the chief. You. I was engaged to you so they let me in." Astrid swallowed, her turn to fidget nervously. "They gave Ruff all sort of advice. And stories about, well, you know." She licked her lips nervously, her eyes darting to his and away like a nervous deer. "I suppose I started wondering what it would be like, once you were back."

"Umâ€|" he said awkwardly. "I â€| I don't mind. That's different, because you knew we were engaged and you weren't, I mean, didn'tâ€|"

"You left thinking I hated you. I knew that. I had even less right,"

she said, her eyes going wide. "I didn't even realise that I was â€‘ out of line. You did, at least." Her shoulders were getting more tense by the second.

"I don't mind," he repeated. "I've lâ€‘" He couldn't finish that. Not before â€‘ "I still don't think it's quite the same thing. I don't feel shamed by it, and â€‘"

"Did Sepha know?" Astrid asked, looking supremely uncomfortable, but squaring her shoulders and forging on anyway.

He shrugged. "It was her idea," he finally conceded. "I'd been saying your name, and she had guessed that I lâ€‘ She was thinking of her husband, too. It wasn't- anything- I mean- " He sighed, frustrated. "It wasn't a good place, what Sepha and I had. I see it now. But back then, beside Toothless, she was all I had. If you want to know whether I cared for her, then yes, I did. If you want to know if I would have married her â€‘ I think so." Astrid's face went pale as newly fallen snow. "But not because of anything other than â€‘ companionship. I thought it would be all I could get, because I couldn't stop- I couldn't stop thinking of you. And I just didn't feel for her what I do for you, but I didn't want to be â€‘ alone. Neither did she, and, if she hadn't met that fisherman, well. Things would be different."

They were quiet for a few moments, their breath mingling as they looked at one another tensely.

"I owe that fisherman, then," Astrid said strongly. "A lot."

Hiccup felt his eyes go wide, his heart picking up. "Astrid?" he choked out.

"If this is the worse you're going to tell me, then, I â€‘ It's strange, yes. It's â€‘ uncomfortable. But I thought of so many worse things." She looked at him with a laden sheen in her eyes, her jaw working. "For the longest time, I thought you were in love with her, and couldn't look at me because you were still faithful to her."

"What- how-"

"When you were drawing in the clay the day before the Red Death came, you told Toothless 'the most beautiful woman in Midgard', and then, when you were so sick after the battle, you kept calling for her, so much, so I thought- " There were actual tears in her eyes as she choked up, biting down hard on her lip. She breathed deeply for a few moments as he sat quietly, waiting to see if she'd continue. "It's why I was so angry, at the opening feast. You'd been so nice to me; and the axe; I'd forgotten about this â€‘ other woman you were supposed to love." He inhaled sharply and her eyes rose to his automatically, and then she couldn't seem to unstick them. He felt parched and drowning; completely naked under her stare. "When you went out there to dance with Sleet after you'd told me you couldn't, I just thought you couldn't stand with me because you didn't want the engagement. It â€‘ hurt. So I lashed out."

"It's ok," he replied. "I understand. I understand even better now. I would have been even more upset. And terribly jealous."

"I was, trust me," she said, her tone only ghosting over a joke, though they still smiled tentatively at one another. Her hands squeezed his and then shook his grip off before she touched him hesitantly, settling on palm curled on his shoulder pad while the other brushed the hair out of his eyes. His insides, already a turmoil of still-fearful emotions, jolted out of control, and he just let his face sink into her touch, kissing her palm. When she went tense again, he retreated quickly, apologising and looking away.

"And now that you know that," he said, his voice rough again, "I need to know what you want." It was time. The verdict was out, and the axe was in her hand.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Our â€| our engagement. You said that I was becoming important to you." His throat almost closed again as the possibility of losing that suddenly became very real, and he'd had no idea how close to his heart he had been keeping those words until now that they were going to be taken back. "I will understand, if â€| but I need to know, Astrid."

"What about you?" she asked, fidgeting. "If Sepha isn't this 'most beautiful woman', the one you were in love with, then who isâ€!"

"I already told you," Hiccup replied, on tenterhooks to know her answer, more fearful every moment she dawdled. "It's you."

She stared at him for a moment. "You're in love with me?"

His breath stopped, dizziness clouding his eyes as he realised belatedly what he'd admitted. It was too much; too much, too soon, he was sure of it. His heart was beating so hard that it hurt, his lungs and chest feeling constricted and shrunken, like an over-worked muscle starved of air and water.

But it was useless denying it now. He opened his mouth, making his dry tongue move.

"I â€| I've been in love with you since I was twelve. Maybe younger." He looked at her steadily, trying to read her reactions, but she was staring at him blankly, like her mind had been switched off. Almost trembling, he went on. "I don't know, I â€| All I know is that how I feel really isn't a question here." He was risking his life, possibly even a broken nose and broken teeth, but he didn't care. What could be worse than this? And if she flinched and moved away, he'd know without saying anything. He bent down and kissed her head.

He didn't know what to feel when she didn't move at all. His heart twisted into a painful knot. "I, um, thought I was very lucky to come home and find myself engaged to you. It was like â€| Nana intervened, with Frigga and Freya together, for me."

She wasn't saying anything. She wasn't saying anything. Oh _Odin's breath_, she wasn't â€|

"But I really can't keep this engagement going if I don't know that you're â€| ok with it. And withâ€| what I did." Silence. Another knot joined the first, and he blinked back burning eyes. "At least ok with

it. That you at least like me and aren't doing this just out of duty, and that you'll not be miserable and I'll watch you be miserable beside me while I lo-"

She punched him in the gut, then, robbing his breath. He coughed helplessly, his dizziness getting worse until everything turned.

"That's for your lusty fantasies." His belly spasmed and he groaned. A feather-light, tentative kiss on his cheek preceded her moving forward, her knees coming up against his armpit as she curled up against his chest. He hesitantly put his arms around her, and when she didn't twist one of them off, a part of his chest collapsed with relief. "I can't say that it isn't weird, or that I \mathbb{E} love you too." The second knot almost reformed. "But I don't know what that feels like, not really. I know how to love my mother and my father, my siblings and the children, but I- I'm not sure I know how I should love you. I want to try, though. Please."

He ducked his head, nodding against her crown. "Whatever you need," he replied with as much truth as he could pour into it.

"And don't worry about your \mathbb{E} thoughts." One of her hands purposefully spanned his chest, slow and languorous, before it darted to his shoulder again and she hid her face in his neck. "As we found out in that shed, you're not the only one who has them, remember?"

"Yeah \mathbb{E} !" It was true, the shed Snotlout had locked them had come closest to seeing them become lovers - and the thought alone almost made him shudder. But this seems more raw, somehow. With all the bravado stripped away, and passion a simmering heat rather than a blazing fire, it all seemed more real, and thus more tangible and fragile.

"I want to be your wife, Hiccup," she went on, and the knots in his heart began to loosen more rapidly, the first thrills of happiness beating through. It may also have been relief. Or a heart attack. If he wasn't dead by tonight, he'd be alright. "I want to learn how to care for you as you do, and be your- your lover. I've certainly thought about it. Since you've been back."

Her voice was small, but it made him light headed anyway.

"Oh \mathbb{E} !" he said, feeling lost. He had no idea what he was supposed to feel. He had never considered himself desirable; it hadn't crossed his mind, even after the shed, and after she'd said it afterwards. He'd heard the words, but they hadn't really sunk in. But now everything was stripped completely bare, and there was nowhere left to hide, so her words sunk all the way to the bottom of him.

Astrid wanted to be his lover, and his wife. It was \mathbb{E} enough. More; way, way more than enough.

They spent a few moments in silence again, this one slightly less tense and awkward. The sun had left the sea by a hair, and it shimmered on the waves in blazing white flecks. It occurred to him that he hadn't told her he wanted to be her husband, but suddenly blurting it out after a pause seemed horrible. So he looked at the rock mound instead, and blinked.

"You never told me what that was," he realised out loud. Astrid looked up at him, following his gaze to the stones and then groaning. Then she sighs, resting her cheek against his chest and looking at the stones contemplatively.

"They're a shrine," she replied quietly. "I used to come here every morning; pray for your safety. It's why the carvings are so popular; if they kept your stupid head safe and sound all these years, they must work."

Hiccup snorted, banging his head back against the tree.

"I'm an idiot," he groaned. "An idiot and a monster and I should be flogged."

"What?" she asked, looking horrified.

"I â€“ it's right there, isn't it," he waved at the shrine, feeling love and shame and anger at himself, all at once. "How much you care for me. It's written all over that thing! And your mother told me you came out here in the storm and got frostbite. And I was in that hut, debating whether to leave."

"What?!"

"You can punch my teeth out for this, I deserve it," he shouted, angry at himself as he knocked the back of his head against the tree again in frustration. "I was terrified of what you'd think once I told you of Sepha. Utterly, spitless scared. I was so afraid that you'd â€“ despise me. Find me," he rolled his shoulders uncomfortably, his head lolling to the side. "disgusting, for thinking of you that way. And Berk has so many expectations, and my father, and I'm just me. But mostly it was â€“ this. I was a coward; I was weak. I almost took Toothless and flew for it."

Astrid pinched the back of his hand, but not as much as he would have thought.

"You were that â€“ torn up?"

"Astrid, I love you," and it was easier the second time. "Your opinion is the most important one in the world. If you'd hated me â€“ and it wasn't only that, I won't lie to you. I was afraid of losing all my freedom. I hadn't been flying with Toothless in an age, and â€“ Chief, Astrid. They want me to be chief. Me."

"You'll be great," she sighed, her fingers soothing the skin she'd pulled. "And I'll be here. I'll knock as many heads for you as you need."

He snorted despite himself, and as the tension drained out of him, everything suddenly became fuzzy and terribly hilarious. He began laughing, holding her tighter.

"I've been so scared," he babbled. "So damn terrified. Every time I thought about telling you, about Sepha, it was all I could do not to be sick. And this damn Thing on top of everythingâ€!"

"It's not been easy," she said tiredly, curling up against him

further.

"And then you quarrelled with me, and I was so worriedâ€| you haven't told me that, either." He nudged her gently. "Go on; I spilled my guts in a messy heap in your lap. You need to return the favour or it's not fair."

She blinked up at him, nonplussed.

"You know, why you were quarrelling with me?" She opened her mouth.
"Before_ the dance?"

Her mouth closed abruptly, her eyes going wide before they began darting around. He clamped his arms around her and she glared at him terribly.

"No! No more secrets or escaping or evading! Later, remember?" He gave her a nudge with a mock stern look. "It's later. My secrets are all out. I'm fresh out of them. Your turn."

"You're going to think it's so stupid," she said, looking utterly horrified. "Compared to yours."

"So it's a little thing, good. I don't think I can do earth-shattering right now," he said with aplomb. She poked him in the ribs and he squirmed, then clamped his elbows around her arms. "Don't you _dare_, Astrid Hofferson. Now tell me; why were you so angry at me before the dance?"

"Hiccup-"

"Astrid!"

"You cut our baths short!"

He blinked at her, and she went completely scarlet, up to the roots of her hair. Her mouth clamped shut with an audible click.

"You mean to tell me," he replied, feeling even more light headed.
"That you were mad because you didn't get to see me naked?"

"No! Yes!" She scooted backwards and covered her face with her hands. "That was part of it!" she wailed. Even her ears were crimson. Then she huffed, flinging her hands into her lap angrily and moving to sit on his knees again. "Ok. Whole truth, right?" He could only nod.
"Then yes. Part if it was because I wanted to be .. close to you. Like that. I've said that I want to be your lover, don't make me say it again!"

He nodded again, trying to give her the thinking time she had given him, even though his brain was literally exploding with all the possibilities of this new â€| revelation.

Gods â€| really? She wasn't only saying it, or planning for it in the future. She wanted that sort of thing now?

"It's not only that. Stop thinking of me naked," she muttered.

"Oh," he said, wondering why it was suddenly wrong when not a moment before she'd been speaking about lovers and baths and-

"It's fine! It just distracts you and I need your head here right now!" Her voice went down to a whisper. "Don't make me say this twice."

He nodded slowly in realisation. "Ok. Thoughts about you wet and naked are put away for later." He deserved that elbow to the gut, but she was a lot less nervous when she chuckled helplessly.

"I grew up on stories of my mother telling me she and dad fell in love when they spoke in the tub. It's a wife's duty to help her husband, you know? And all the family. With your mum gone, you may not remember, but I really needed to be there for you. I mean, even if I didn't care, which I do. When you shut me out, it would have looked bad if people found out."

"So I messed up again?" he groaned. Her lips twitched.

"Only a little. Anyway, I had â€œ I enjoyed that time. I'd begun to care for you already, you know. And I was hoping it could â€œ happen again. Like my parents, I mean."

"I thought you wanted to be a shield maiden when your mother told you these thingsâ€œ"

"Obviously, I changed my mind," she said dangerously, giving him a full-on glare. "I'm thinking of changing it again!"

"Sorry, sorry! It's just that, you know, I'm sure a couple of your brothers were conceived in that tub, since they were already married and all, so I don't think it was just love your mother was talking about—" He got a sound slap to the head. "Ow!"

"Hiccup!" she admonished. Then her face fell. "See, I told you you'd find it stupid!"

"It's not! It's not stupid!" he said, defensively. "Really. It's just hard to wrap my head around the fact that you want me. It seems â€œ impossible."

"Well, it's not. Get used to it."

Oh gods, could he get used to it. All the things they could doâ€œ the mind boggled. It literally felt like a boiled egg at just the thought.

"It wasn't even just that," she said with a shrug. Then she gave him a look that sent his heart racing for totally different reasons. "Though that was nice too. Half the village wants your beautiful arse, you know? But only I got to see it out of those tight leathers."

His insides creaked to a halt as he could only stare at her. Those trousers were â€œ on purpose ?!

She cleared her voice, flicking his nose. He could still only stare, and she chuckled. "Jokes aside â€œ" she looked down. "That was the only time of the day â€œ sometimes the whole week, when we were alone together. There was never any other time; sometimes your father, sometimes our friends, sometimes people of the village, it was always

someone or something come to look for you or ask something or even just to talk. And in that tub, it was just us." She shrugged, going red again and getting her hair out of her face in a nervous gesture.

"I â€| you're right," he said, stunned. "I hadn't realised. I'm really sorry; I - they - meant something different, to me."

"They did?" she asked, almost timidly; which a few months ago he would have deemed impossible.

"Yes, I â€| well, apart from the obvious," he replied, prying his eyes away from her breast at her knowing look. "Look, you won't like this, but â€| it was â€| humiliating, for me."

"Humili-" she choked, looking more hurt than he'd seen her all morning. "How is letting the girl who cares about you be there for you when you need it humiliating!"

"You don't think so?" he replied challengingly. "If it were you, coming back to Berk after five years, waking up with half your leg gone. And then suddenly I'm there, naked as the day I was born, and getting you naked whether you wanted to or not; hauling you around like a child, and not showing the least bit of interest while I did it-"

"I was plenty interested!"

"It didn't seem that way!" he cut her off earnestly, trying to make her understand. "You never looked, never blushed or acted in any way that â€|" He shrugged. "I didn't know what to do with myself. And the thought that you were doing it out of dutyâ€| I didn't know it looked bad for you if you didn't, but I did know that you were doing it as my betrothed. And it â€| hurt, more than a little."

"Hiccup," she sighed. He tried to look as chagrined as possible.

"I was uncomfortable. I'm still a little uncomfortable, if I'm to be honest." He shrugged. "I'm uncomfortable with the fact that you've â€| cleaned me when I was peeing all over myself like an infant. I'm uncomfortable with the fact that you were taking my clothes on and off me while I was asleep because â€| no one's done that since my mother was around. I'm horribly uncomfortable that you've seen â€| all of this." He waved at himself. "We both know there's not much I have to offer. Well, even less now."

"I just told you-"

"I know, and I told you it's hard to believe. Come on, admit it." He rolled his eyes. "I can take the truth. You like me, and that's awesome, but I'm not â€| attractive, in the slightest. The sooner we get that out of the way, the better. I mean, you laughed when you walked in on me while I dressed, before we went to rescue the Hopeless ships."

"Because you fell over," she pointed out flatly.

"Exactly," he said, waving a finger. "Anyone else would have been too caught up in the embarrassing fact that I was practically naked to bother with the fact that I'd fallen over."

"Hicc- ...ungh," she said, sounding exasperated. "Hiccup, look, I'm used to seeing men in the buff. I have brothers; many of them. On wash day, we drag out the tub and it's ϵ a family thing. Dad even likes to stay naked as long as possible. Mum hoped he would stop when my brothers brought their wives in, but nooo ϵ ." She sighed, her exasperation finding a new target. "But the truth is, your dad is the chief. You're the chief's son. You have certain privileges that you're used to and that other people don't have, like private baths."

"But you just said your parents bonded in the tub?" he asked, confused.

"They started a new hall, idiot, like Fishlegs and Ruff!" She threw her hands up and he tried to look as sheepish as possible, while at the same time remembering that gaggle of naked Vikings he'd walked in on before that horrid dance. "The bottom line is, I grew up in a crowded hall, I grew up helping my father and brothers wash every week. Don't expect me to cover my face and squeal when you're naked because ϵ because I'm used to it. I've seen it all before and every man is mostly the same, just like every woman is mostly the same, and ϵ "

"But it's supposed to be different, isn't it?" he asked, honestly confounded by her nonchalance. "When it's someone ϵ you care for, someone you ϵ " He couldn't say 'want' and felt utterly stupid for it. He just shrugged instead.

"Yes," she sighed. "It should. It is."

"So obviously, my point still stands, as you don't have any different reaction, that ϵ there's nothing much to see under these clothes."

"Hiccup," she said, her tone dangerous. "When this is all over, I'm going to make you the tightest pair of trousers you've ever owned. And I'm going to sew you the shortest tunic this side of the North Sea. And then we're going for a walk around Berk. I'm going to parade you around like a prize stud, and all the women will be green with envy. Because every damn woman in the whole archipelago has looked at you, Hiccup. Twice. But you're mine."

"Been for ages," he said breathlessly, trying to make his head work and understand what she'd just said. It still seemed a great deal impossible.

"Good. And I'm yours, so that's settled."

He looked at her for a moment more, trying to understand. She'd said in one breath that she found him attractive, and the next that she thought him nothing above average, because she was used to naked men and he was a naked man and elicited no reaction from her. It made absolutely no sense to him, so he was either missing the point, or she was lying. Maybe to make him feel better, or ϵ but Astrid didn't lie. So he smiled at her, deciding that, whatever the case, she seemed willing enough to try; and maybe he'd beef up a bit before he died, hopefully not with the gut, but ...

"You mean you ϵ I mean, hypothetically ϵ " he tried, and failed, to

reign in his thoughts.

"Aha." He had no idea what she was confirming, but he was happy with it anyway.

"So you wouldn't mind if I, if we, say, start behaving like a real, I mean, couple?"

Astrid's face became predatory.

"Good, so everyone will be clear. You're nothing else. You're a couple. With me."

He blinked. "That doesn't even make grammatical sense," he moaned and it wasn't even out of his mouth before she was punching him.

"Ow!"

"Wuss!" she said, happiness and eagerness on her face, and he grinned back when he realised she was waiting for his response.

"Your wuss," he murmured.

"And don't you forget it," she breathed back, her lips ghosting against his and leaving him panting and tilting his head after her, trying to capture her mouth. He'd been yearning to kiss her like she was the water to his drought for weeks, ever since that day in the Great Hall, when everything had almost gone to the dogs. Then he remembered there was one more thing â€‘ it somehow didn't seem so impending now, even though it was important. "Hey, Astrid?" he whispered, eyes still half-closed, lips still half caressing hers as she teased him, evading and rubbing his nose to hers.

"What?" she said tauntingly. She was probably waiting for him to beg. He would; in a moment.

"I want to ask you something," he said with a smile, looking at her own contented face. She seemed to sense the tenderness of his voice, because she didn't tense, and he was glad. "Astrid, I want to court you. Officially."

She looked confused, moving slightly back. He almost whined at the lack of her lips so close to his.

"We're promised," she said, as if he was a rather dull child. He snorted.

"On paper," he replied, "which is great, but â€‘ I want to court you. Give you gifts and take you places. Do special things for you. Try to see if I could, maybe," he hesitated, gave a nervous jiggle of his shoulders, "help you along that road from care to â€‘ something else?"

Her face went serious, and she frowned in thought. He held his tongue, even though a gaggle of babbling was banging at the gates of his teeth, trying to get out and embarrass him.

"I think I'd like that?" she said.

"Just think?" he asked worriedly at her uncertain tone.

"I reserve the right to change my mind if you do anything too sappy," she replied with a laugh.

"Astrid, 'courting' is the definition of 'sappy', " he said with a groan, and she chortled again. "I'll be leaving you flowers, and taking you places to be alone, and â€| writing you poetry and love lettersâ€|" His ears burned at the only thought.

"More love letters?" she asked, her eyes shining. "I'll have to add more hooks."

"Huh?" he replied intelligently.

"I meanâ€| I found them. The words and the poem, on the axe." She looked like a child for a second, colour high and eyes bright. "And I'm sort of hoping that all your love letters are going to be written like that."

"...Oh," he muttered. "What have I gotten myself intoâ€|"

"Your fault for setting the standard so high," she smirked back, triumphant. "I'm going to be decked out in all this beautiful armour and weapons with all that lovely carving on it, and you'll be in those tight trousers, and everyone is going to be so damn jealous. Even the dragons!"

Hiccup gaped at her. He wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. He was going to be stuck in the forge for days but â€| if it put that look on her face â€|

"Oi," he replied, trying to keep the breathless quality from his voice as her elation went straight to his malnourished ego. "Then you knew how much I loved you. You were just giving me a hard time!" He couldn't help wanting to know what her first reaction to his poem had been, but he couldn't quite bring himself to say it.

"And how was I supposed to know?" she replied with a peaked brow.

"It's written on the axe, plain as day!" he said in mock annoyance. "You even called it a love letter!"

"Plain as day your left foot!" she replied, nudging his side and making him try to squirm away. His stump gave another tug of sharp pain that kept him from falling into the breathless, hiccuping laughs tickling usually produced. He clamped her hands in his again.

"Haddock, you're as clear as mud. It wasn't plain at all! It was poetry, and confusing! Fishlegs had to explain it to me!"

"Fishlegs?" he asked, mortified. "Fishlegs saw my love poem?!"

"And Ruff and Tuff," she went on with a shrug, wrenching her hands away to fold her arms defiantly. "What of it? Were you planning on doing the courting in secret?"

"No, but-"

"Then it's not a problem." She punched his shoulder. "Because

everyone needs to know that you're courting me. And that I'm all happy to be courted, and that no one else gets to have racy thoughts about you."

"Ok, okâ€| sheeshâ€|" He felt his face grow hot even as it twisted with that incredulous, confused feeling in his chest at the thought - the thought that had sunk all the way into his chest this time, and anchored - that she wanted him. That she had a problem keeping her hands off him and she had a problem with other women looking.

"Not ok. I need to spend some time convincing you, it seems." She paused when he looked at her with wide eyes. And he never thought he'd do this, but â€|

"You mean, kill me?" he said with a leer. "Because I'm still waiting." Gods, he was goading Astrid Hofferson on while they spoke about sex. And love. Together.

Holy hell they were wearing too many clothes. But his oath! Oh, gods, he'd cock-blocked himself!

"Yes," she finally said, crimson in the face but straight backed. And her breasts just poppedâ€| aaand his eyes couldn't look away. Crap, crap, crapâ€| "And you can look at those all you like."

Oh boy. He had permission now? He was never going to get anything done again. Ever.

"Oh. Erm. I mean, ahâ€|" Oh, suave. The leaves in the tree were swooning with his charm.

"Now," she said, scooting back down his shin to straighten her probably numb legs. He knew his were. "Let's get to the hall, get you clean â€| maybe we can catch some alone time in that tub," she whispered, looking through her lashes alluringly. His legs may be asleep, but another part of him certainly wasn't. "And then after that, maybe, I'll let you get some sleep, depending on how much fun killing you i- whoa!"

She moved back far enough to hit his stump, and suddenly his world was stars, colours and curses as he pushed her off with a hiss. She was in his ear immediately, asking what was wrong.

"There is something up with that leg. Oh, I knew I should have tied you down and just ripped your damn foot and trousers off! And it's later now, so don't you dare try to stop me!"

Oh dear gods, everything hurt, but he just wanted her to do that right now. Her hands were all over his face and he closed his eyes to it, her fingers cool against his skin and so very sharp.

"Hiccup, you idiot! You're running a fever! You're not warm because- you're hot because you're ill! Stupid man!"

Ah. So the light head and the fuzziness wasn't just Astrid's relative proximity.

He was suddenly hauled up and tugged away at a crisp pace he could barely keep up with, most of his weight hauled off his bad leg even though she was shorter. Her armour dug into his armpit, but it kept

him focussed.

"This is doing wonders for my dignity. Are you going to parade your hot gimp stud now, or shall we wait for later?" he deadpanned.

"Smartarse. You always have to get the last word, don't you?" she told him, a mix of anger and worry in her voice, her face a mask of anxiety. He was sorry to see her like that.

"Always," he said, trying to wring a smile out of her.

"We'll see about that when I'm naked!" she replied. "Killing you."

The groan that escaped his mouth was not dignified in the slightest. But it put a slightly smug smile on her face above the worry, so it was worth it.

=0=

Stoick had just sat down on his chair a mug of warmed ale in hand and ready to doze off for a few hours until the designated Wakers ran the rounds of the village, or until something was spotted on the horizon.

His head was already bobbing, eyelids heavy, when his front door burst open and he was on his feet, hammer in hand, before he really knew how he'd moved.

"Stoick," Astrid said, her voice strained. "Give me a hand." Stoick blinked the mustiness out of his sight to see her holding Hiccup up, and quickly took his other arm. "Get him to his bed. I don't think he can walk up."

"What happened?" he asked urgently. Hiccup had been fine when he'd left the Great Hall to go after her not an hour ago.

"I don't actually know," she said, breathless with anxiety and fatigue. Stoick hadn't been the only one who had not slept a wink last night, and Astrid had been out in the cold. "He's running a fever; I think he's had an injury to his stump he's been hiding."

"I â€“ why would he do that?"

"Because he's a man!" She yelled, thunder clouds gathering on her forehead as she stumbled with him towards the bed. She pulled the curtain half-shut behind them and began to strip Hiccup without preamble. "Please Stoick, I know you're tired, but go get Goethi, or my Mother. I think it's something worse than I can handle."

"Asta..." Hiccup murmured. "I already told you, I made you an oath. Not till the wedding night." Stoick blinked down between them, watching in bemusement as every visible patch of Astrid's skin became a darker and darker red.

"Please, Stoick?" she said, a pleading note in her voice as she unclasped the various hooks and buckles on Hiccup's chest while avoiding his batting hands and serious glare, which were completely incongruous with the flush on his face and sweat on his forehead.

"He's gotten worse on the way here. Please hurry."

His fatigue clung to him for another second before he shook it off and left in a hurry. All the people had been warned of the impending attack, and had been told to go home and pack their precious and essentials. The non-fighters would be moved to the safe beaches, while the fighters had been ordered into ranks. Everything was placed and set to move the moment they received a signal, but he knew that at the moment most people were preparing; that was most true for the healers.

Still, his son was in need, and if Astrid's face was indication enough, as well as his rough breathing and flushed cheeks, he had better not delay any further.

He was out and back again as quickly as he could. Goethi had been none too pleased, but now she was spitting mad, because Stoick had actually grabbed her and carted her to his hall on his shoulder when she hasn't moved fast enough. He had a couple of terror bites he just knew she wasn't going to medicate out of spite.

Meanwhile, Astrid had managed to get him out of his clothes and into a pair of long sleeping trousers, but what stopped Stoick short was that she actually had tears streaming down her face.

"Astrid!" his son murmured.

"Shut up," she said back, her tone sad.

"Asta!"

"Don't you dare 'Asta' me! I'm so angry at you right now I could thump you!"

"How bad is it?" Stoick asked, closing the door behind him.

"How bad? I'll tell you how bad! If it were anyone else, he'd be hopping with fever and wailing with pain! I don't even know how he's walked on it. For days to get it like that!" She spared a moment to glare at him furiously. Hiccup did his best to look sheepish even as he panted. "He has a huge sore - a sore - right next to the stitches, and he didn't say anything!"

"Astrid!"

"No!" she yelled back, more tears flowing. "You didn't trust me with this! At all! I'm so mad at you right now I could scream!" She moved away from his bed, ignoring the beseeching arm that rose to try to stop her. "I'm going to pack our things and then I'm going to help my mother." She ran upstairs without another word, wiping at her face.

"Give her time to cool off," Stoick said when Hiccup turned worried eyes to him.

"I know," he said regretfully. "But she can't leave; she needs to rest too. She looks so tired!"

"And with good reason, with all the worrying you've had her do," Stoick admonished. "What were you thinking? You've put yourself in

"he ran a hand down his face and turned to the Goethi. "How bad is it?"

She frowned as she examined him, shaking her head in disappointment and glaring at his son. Hiccup frowned at the both of them.

"Oh you can all yell and frown all you want! What was I supposed to do, stay in bed with the Thing going? I was going to take it easy for Snoggletog, rest up and let you see it ... I even promised you, remember?" This he yelled towards his old room.

"Excuses!" came the furious reply.

"Not true!" Hiccup shouted back in indignation, ignoring whatever pain the healer was causing as she cleaned his reddened wound and glaring at the reed wall. "I was busy! The only way for this to heal is to stay off it, and I couldn't do that, with all the people here and the things to do! Berk had to appear strong, and even I!" He glared at his stump. "And I'm sure this stupid monster blister would have healed if I hadn't been forced to go out dancing on it!"

There was a sudden silence upstairs.

"Ooooh Madfoot!" Astrid suddenly intoned, leaking fury in her voice so fast that the air felt wet. "I'm going to kill him with my bare hands. I'm going to rip his belly open with my fingernails, twist his guts into knots and then stuff them down his throat so I can watch him suffocate on it! I'm going to , , ,"

A slew of ever more creatively bloody threats began descending from the room as the dragging and banging resumed while she packed.

"The first time she's giving birth," Stoick whispered to his son, "Take your dragon and go on a twenty-four hour flight. She's deadly."

"I know," Hiccup replied fondly, smiling up at the reeds, and Stoick knew that wasn't even the fever talking. "But how long is this going to take?" he went on, addressing the Goethi. "I have to help the others, and I need to have the foot back on for the battle. I don't think Toothless will fight, but I can be front line with a team of fighters."

The Goethi's glare increased, and she shook her head.

"What? I'm going out there, you can't stop me!" The old woman's eyes narrowed in challenge. Hiccup turned his eyes towards his father.

"You tell her! I'm the heir of Berk! I have to be seen out there in the first battle we're having! It's my duty!"

"And it's my duty as your betrothed to take care of you!" Astrid replied, coming down the stairs with two full baskets. "We don't always get what we want, see?"

"Astrid!" Hiccup sighed, looking at her unhappily.

The Goethi rolled her eyes and tapped her staff against Astrid's hip gently. She scratched a few things into the fire's soot.

"Get my mother and tell her to bring the elk brew?" The Goethi

nodded, and Astrid dropped the basket by the door and left.

"Dad," Hiccup started. Stoick sighed and sat down beside him.

"Son, you cannot risk it," he replied, and cut his off when he opened his mouth. "See what the Goethi tells you, take what she gives. Maybe you have enough to recover enough energy. We'll see." he got a glare from the healer, "But please don't ever hide this from us again."

"I wont, it was just â€| the Thing, and then the dragons leaving. It got out of hand. I wasn't even planning on _hiding_ â€| just used to taking care of it all."

"I understand, but Astridâ€|."

"I know, I get it too. I'll talk to her. And I'll take your horrible medicine," he said to Goethi. She scoffed - as if he had any other option, poor boy.

"Dad, Berk _needs_ me. I'm not letting people down _now_. It's the first battle; I'm yourâ€|" he swallowed, "I'm your son. It's my duty to be out there." He looked around the hut, seeming deep in thought as his eyes lingered on every single object. They were fever-bright, but his lucidity seemed to be fluctuating, and right now he seemed dead serious. "This is my _home_. I'm not just lying down and letting people take it from me."

The feeling in Stoick's chest had no real name, but it was large and beating. He suspected it may have been pride, love and more love all rolled into one. His poor old heart was going to be in trouble soon if it didn't let up. He walked a step forward and put a hand on his son's bare shoulder, the Goethi giving him disapproving looks.

"You understand, right?" Hiccup asked earnestly.

"Yes, son. I do." He turned to Goethi. "Patch him up as best you can. He can rest after the battle."

The Goethi looked like she was going to spear him with her staff. Hiccup looked at his father with a new light in his eyes - Stoick just hoped it was not related to his fever, but the determination he saw written there made the feeling of pride and aching understanding in his chest grow exponentially. Finally, he and his son saw eye-to-eye. Finally, they had something upon which level they met without the need for a long, awkward discussion, the obstacle of many words neither one of them knew how to articulate with the other.

The need to protect their home. For the first time in many years, Stoick felt a sense of unity with his son that was complete and almost heartbreakingly. He squeezed his shoulder.

"I'm proud to call you my son," he said, uncaring that the Goethi was watching. Uncaring if the whole village did. No man had the right to be this proud of their heir, but the gods knew that Hiccup had worked hard for it. He deserved it. And it was all the more heartbreakingly.

"I'll go tell Astrid what you told me, and try to get her to rest. You do what the Goethi tells you," he said, trying not to sound choked. He gave him a light pat on the shoulder - aah, darn it all,

he'd almost gone sprawling - and moved out of the hut.

Stoick waited a few moments, staring out at the grey dawn, sun now hidden behind the cloud banks in the earliest hour of the morning. He wasn't disappointed as the Goethi tottered out a moment later, her staff rattling furiously as she looked this way and that to - Stoick guessed - see which way the chief had gone. As soon as she saw him waiting for her she paused, then gave him the shrewd sideways tilt of her head that he knew so well.

Stoick signalled her to close the door behind her, and once she did they moved slightly away from the chief's hall, crunching the ice under their feet.

"I know what you want to tell me, Mother Goethi" and it is unnecessary," Stoick said heavily. His chest was still so full of love and pride, of happiness at that final, complete connection with his son. And he was going to betray it. "The elk brew it will put him to sleep, won't it?"

Goethi's eyes widened, then she nodded with a narrow gaze.

"Give it to him," he said, his tongue feeling leaden at the deception. His son, his poor son, about to be betrayed by his own father. But he could not be allowed out with that fever, fighting on that leg. He would die, or be worse wounded. It was not a decision he could make, not one he could allow Hiccup to make either. Goethi sighed, petting his leg consolingly, as if it made up for what Stoick was about to do.

Stoick felt sick to his stomach when the women returned, and Hiccup, still puffing from his fever, his stump exposed to the room except for a few bandages, gave them an apologetic smile. Goethi scratched a few symbols in the ashes, and Brunhilda began to decipher them quietly - and Astrid, smart girl that she was, watched like a hawk. That was probably how she had understood the Goethi's request before. All three women looked at one another, and then Astrid straightened her back and glared at the other two. Brunhilda nodded sadly, and the Goethi gave her a knowing look. With a jerk of her head, the healer made Brunhilda hand Astrid the bottle she'd brought, and the younger blonde woman stepped towards the bed.

"Don't be mad at me," Hiccup said right away as he sat up. He had sweat trickling down his brow, and Astrid brushed sodden hair off his face as Stoick offered the two remaining woman a seat and a mug of ale. They pretended to be occupied, but the hushed whispers were the only noises in the room above the fire.

"I'm not," Astrid replied. "Though you may be."

Hiccup frowned at her and she put the bottle down. Stoick pretended to look away when she kissed him, and Hiccup tried to move away from her several times to look at her face before he gave in to her advances. His eyes stayed closed for a moment longer when she moved away, her hands lingering on his cheek as her thumb wiped sweat off his eyes.

"That was for..?" he asked when he finally opened them, licking his lips. Astrid was almost as flushed as he was, probably highly aware of their eyes on her even as Hiccup seemed happily oblivious.

"That was me saying sorry," Astrid said with an amused, apologetic expression, reaching for the bottle she'd put down on one of the shelves near the bed. "Because this is going to taste terrible."

"Let me guess," Hiccup said, and that tone of laughter in the face of impending doom just went to Stoick's heart. Here they were, the people who his son trusted most in the world. "There's actual elk in that. No! No - pieces of elk. Some of the most outlandish, disgusting pieces!"

Astrid snorted despite herself, bottom lip held firmly in her teeth as his son managed to wrangle an amused, happy look from her even as they did the unthinkable. The look that the two young ones were giving each other was unmistakable, and Stoick exchanged a sad glance with Brunhilda.

"Something like that," she murmured back, and this time Stoick was sure that even Astrid forgot about the people in the room as she kissed him, his arms coming around her and leaving smudges of shining sweat wherever they touched.

"Wow, a freebee," Hiccup muttered when they separated, only audible because the room was dead silent, the fire low. "It must taste really bad."

"You have no idea," Astrid muttered. "Mum added ice to it - it's good for your fever and you won't taste it as much, but it's the best we can do, and it's nowhere near enough."

"I won't ask you to kiss it better," Hiccup said, cringing at the smell as the bottle was uncorked. "I won't make you suffer with me." A quick gulp had him gagging and pulling all sorts of faces, coughing frantically. "Oh, oh gods; you weren't kidding. Oooh boy, you're never going to kiss me again, the taste is never going away!"

"You have to drink it all," Astrid said in chagrin, and Hiccup gave her a look seeking pity, which she denied with a regretful head shake. With a deep breath, Hiccup downed the rest of bottle, putting it down with a grimace of disgust and actual nausea.

"Oh for all the gnomes that ruin ale, that tasted like piss," he hissed through his teeth, eyes tight shut as he held his stomach. "Can I at least have some water?"

Stoick got up and brought him a cup from the drinking jug right away, which Hiccup downed with gratitude, but with another grimace on his face as soon as the liquid hit his stomach.

"I'm going to be sick," he muttered haplessly. Astrid was at his side right away, taking a seat on his bed as she pushed him down gently to lay flat, soothing hair out of his sweaty face and rubbing his arms up and down.

"You can't, Hiccup, you have to keep that down," she admonished gently, her touches seeming to help as he calmed, his breathing subsiding into something more steady and relaxed. Stoick realised that the medicine was taking effect.

"Stay?" Hiccup muttered airily. Astrid gave him a look and Stoick shrugged, so she smiled down at his son, though his eyes were closed.

"Of course," she replied, and he relaxed further at this. Within moments, he was sleeping deeply, and Astrid's breathing hitched into a sob, then she wrangled it into control.

They were taking away his son's right to battle. They were taking away his honour, his pride, and what every Viking had the sacred right to. They were the people who he trusted the most, and here they wereâ€¦

Brunhilda hugged her daughter, who never left her seat on the bed, and excused herself to return to finishing her own chores and packing, the Goethi going with her. The hall collapsed back into silence, Hiccup's peaceful puffs of breath almost a condemnation. Astrid swallowed several times, wiping his arms and face down with ice-water, but in the end had to wipe her cheeks as a wayward tear escaped.

"You think he'll forgive us?" she whispered hoarsely, her hands still drifting through his son's hair.

"He forgave me for all the crap I pulledâ€¦ I think if all goes well, we'll get lucky with him." he said, trying to sound consoling.

"He'll never trust me again," she said, and then took a deep breath, blinking her eyes rapidly and hiding her face. Stoick could not answer that; there was every possibility that he would be very badly hurt by what they had done here today. "Stoick," she went on, her voice steadier than before. "If I don't â€¦ if something goes wrong, tell him that I love him."

The man shifted, both so saddened and so uncomfortable.

"You will tell him yourself," he said, walking up and putting a hand on her shoulder. She shook her head.

"I can't, because it's not true," Astrid replied. Stoick looked down at her in confusion, because if he'd ever seen a woman love a manâ€¦ "I'm not sure what it's supposed to feel like, and I was supposed to have time to learn with him, but â€¦"

"Trust me, Astrid." Stoick replied, his heart going out to her as she sounded so lost and confused, almost like she was grieving already. But she had every right to; near sixteen score Berserkers were going to land on their shores soon, with their dragons all tired, some unable to fight due to their own young ones. And while the Hooligans outnumbered them, this was not a battle which could be fought without casualties. The hand of Urd was poised, shears in hand, waiting for just the right moment to snap the string as Verdandi tied the knot. "Trust me on this one. You won't be lying to him."

Her eyes, blue and wet, reminded him of Val's confusion when she'd first been so angry at herself for not understanding the turmoil in her chest, at the beginning of their marriage. Finally, Astrid nodded, looking back at Hiccup like he was the most precious thing in the world, and Stoick was sure. Val had looked at him like that; and

then, she had looked at Hiccup like that too, though his poor boy probably didn't even remember it.

"Well, the same goes for you, lass," he replied gravely. Sixteen score Berserkers were no joke, and Stoick would be on the front line. "I've never told him that I love him, so he won't believe that. It's not the Viking way anyway. Just tell him I am so very proud of him, and that he'll make a wonderful chief. I know it."

"You can tell him that yourself, too," Astrid replied decidedly. Then she tensed. "If he forgives either one of us."

"He will, lass. He will." Stoick was reminded of this same conversation, a few weeks before the Thing, with Hiccup fearing the same lack of forgiveness from Astrid. He wasn't sure whether they had spoken yet, but he was sure that his son loved this woman. That wasn't something that went away easily, in the same way that Astrid's heart seemed pretty set to the chief.

If Urd preserved them, the hall could finally be a home again. Stoick just prayed she would, because he had waited for so long, to have tiny feet pattering around the floor again. And his son certainly â€¦

He would forgive them. He would.

"I'll announce it in the hall. I'm telling the others he has a high fever, and he's been incapacitated with it. We can't let it out that we've done this."

Astrid merely nodded, and bent down to kiss him, no shame on her face as she didn't even try to hide her emotion.

"I'll get him on a gurney. I'll strap it to Toothless, and he'll take care of him. I think Toothless will want to sit this one out and be with the eggsâ€¦ probably Stormfly too." She looked panicked for a second before she forced herself calm again. "We'll pull through this. I just pray it was strong enough that he'll sleep through it." She paled. "And that we win. I will never, ever forgive myself if we lose, and they find him and take him in his sleepâ€¦ it will be my faultâ€¦"

"It won't happen, Astrid," Stoick replied sternly, although he was housing the same fears. "Berk is stronger than that."

Astrid nodded. Then she reached behind her, unholstering Brisinga and cutting a finger on it to smear blood on the blade. Sucking her thumb, she held the axe between them.

"I swear that I will protect Berk, and him, till my last breath."

"Aye," he replied, putting his fist around hers on the axe handle. They held for a moment, and then Astrid stood, all-business as she put her axe in place and headed for the door.

"Not so fast," Stoick replied. She stopped and turned. "We have â€¦ a little over a half hour. Both of us need the rest." He pointed to Hiccup's bed. "The wakers will let us know when it's time."

"But I have to make a gurneyâ€|" she replied, torn.

"No," he answered firmly. "He will sleep better with you there anyway."

There was colour on her cheeks, but Astrid relented almost right away. Stoick gave her a nudge in, and then drew the curtains, retreating to his chair again, sitting down with what felt like twice the exhaustion of before.

His eyes quickly closed, despite the thoughts and the worries. The rustle of clothes and sheets, and the muted sounds of breathing were a good lullaby to have, after such a long time with a quiet hall. He would not worry about his son's anger, nor about the battle, not right now. He would just pray to Forseti. Because if there was any justice, these two would not be separated now.

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Ã†tta knew that it was childish to suck her finger, and that only little babies did it. But all the adults were being so busy, and so gruff. Dartfoot was holding her hand, and she was sucking her thumb too. Dartbolt and Gustav were with them, their dragons standing close enough so that Ã†tta almost couldn't see anything.

And everyone was being so â€| strange. No one would tell them anything everyone they spoke to just told them to stay put. All the adults were looking so very worried, too, and Ã†tta was not stupid: Something Very Bad was happening.

Tears came to her eyes as she looked around, feeling more scared as the adults whizzed about and yelled at each other. Aunty Astrid had told her that they would be making their way to the pretty beach where they would be safe, but she hadn't said from _what_, and somehow a big black monster, with sharp teeth and an ugly laugh was all she could think about. She felt so scared and confused, and Hiss was coiled around her shoulder, but he seemed to be scared too.

Ã†tta looked at Dartfoot, who squeezed her hand and moved closer to her too.

"Big sister?" she whispered. "Why is everyone in a hurry?"

"Because we're all going to have a nice night on the beach. But it's a secret, and there are going to be people coming we don't want to share it with. So we're hurrying before they come."

Dartfoot nodded. She seemed much calmer, but Ã†tta couldn't share her confidence. Bad Things had already happened, with her _mama_ â€| and now everyone had those same looks on their faces, as nana did when she had last been with her mama.

Something REALLY Bad was happening. And if these people they didn't want to meet were coming to Berk and they didn't want them, there was going to be a Battle. And Bad Things happened in Battle too.

People started shouting directions, and a number of groups began to mill around, some picking up barrels, some picking up weapons and buckets of arrows. Ã†tta's eyes widened as she realised she had been

right. There was going to be a Battle. She sneaked a look at Dartbolt and Gustav, and both of them were looking so very worried. Nutthead had even been with them earlier, and there just had been this look on his face.

More tears gathered in her eyes as she started feeling more and more afraid. Dartfoot spotted Mother Droploug, and then they started walking, all of them holding onto each other's hand or the Nadder's wing. There were another three children with them who Åttta didn't know, and she was too upset to talk to them.

The walk was a long one, and the light was getting less and less. Åttta tried to hide her face in her dolls once, when one of the other children made fun of her for crying, but it had only led to stumbling. So she'd punched him in the face, and hoped that Uncle Hiccup wouldn't be so angry with her. Everyone just told him to stop whining like a baby anyway, so at least Åttta wasn't the only one behaving like a baby.

They had been on the beach for a little bit when Åttta saw her Aunty Astrid coming in with Toothless. She leapt to her feet, feeling so very happy as her heart beat very fast, and then she hugged Aunty Astrid's feet.

"You're going to stay here!" she said. "You're not going to Battle!"

Aunty Astrid came down and hugged her.

"No honeyoats, I have to go," she replied, and then Åttta did cry, because she was feeling so scared and alone. None of her other Aunties had time for her, not when they all had little babies, and Aunty Astrid and Uncle Hiccup were the only two who loved her. Hiss jumped between their shoulders, licking her face to see what her tears tasted like. "Shhh, don't be upset, sweetheart. Uncle Hiccup is staying. You can help care for him."

"Uncle Hiccup," Åttta replied, wiping her eyes to see better and looking around, sniffing.

"Here," Aunty stood, taking her hand and moving her back. Toothless, who was also looking at her and warbling, had something strange coming after him, like a wooden cart without wheels. Uncle Hiccup was lying down on it and he looked asleep.

"He is very tired?" she asked, wondering if he'd gotten so tired when he had gone to look for Hiss and the other dragons. Poor Uncle Hiccup, maybe he'd had to chase them all, one by one, and so it must have been so difficult to get them all back.

"No, little one. He's just a little sick, that's all," Aunty started. Åttta immediately felt terrible, her chest hurting and her heart beating, and she looked up at her Aunty, tears coming back.

"No! He can't be sick! Not Uncle too!"

"What is it?" Astrid replied, hugging her. "Åttta, why are you so upset? He'll be better after he sleepsâ€|"

"That's what the said about mama!" she cried, and all her sadness

came again. "But nana now says that mama is asleep for good, and she won't wake up again!" Uncle Hiccup couldn't fall asleep and not wake up too. He just couldn't. Her papa had gone to sleep in the sea, and her mama had gone to sleep because she was ill, and now Uncle Hiccup just had to stay. "Please Aunty Astrid, wake him up. He can't go 'way too."

"Oh darling, I'm soâ€¹" Aunty kissed her head, and then she picked her up and lay her down next to Uncle Hiccup. "Put your head on his chest, sweetie. You hear that?" Ättta nodded as he heard the comforting noise - nana called it your heart and it was what you loved people with - "As long as you hear that, he'll wake up, darling."

Aunty got a blanket, covering both Uncle and her, tucking it around them and putting a hand on Ättta's hair like her mama used to do.

"Can you take care of Uncle Hiccup for me?" she asked. Ättta nodded, and Aunty smiled at her. The noise of Uncle's heart in her ear was nice - and then she realised she was very tired too, because she had cried a lot when nana had told her that her mama wouldn't wake up, and then they'd walked a lot and worried a lot. Hiss was keeping them both warm, and Uncle Hiccup moved a little bit - Ättta felt even better that he moved. It meant he wasn't going to sleep so, so deeply this time like her mama.

"Good. And if you get scared, tell someone, alright?" Aunty said. "But remember," she held up her little finger, still bandaged. "He made us a promise, no?"

"Yes," Ättta replied, feeling even better as she reached up, her little finger extended too. "And Uncle Hiccup keeps his promises."

He'd promised many things, and they'd all, all, always happened. He'd even brought the dragons back. Uncle Hiccup would not go away. Ättta knew it.

"I leave him to you now, darling," Aunty said. A man came up from behind her, and Aunty stood to talk to him. They spoke on people being in place - what place? - and the lower defences being covered - with cloth? - but Ättta's eyes were closing, because she was warm and safe, and Uncle Hiccup moved again and put an arm around her, so she felt so nice. And his heart didn't stop, even if Ättta had lost count of the thumps it made.

The fire and the worried people and the beach faded away. Uncle Hiccup was here and not going; that was the most important thing.

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1 A number of North Canadian tribes used to collect reindeer urine and drink it, because it had hallucinogenic properties tied to a particular mushroom it ate that was poisonous to humans, but harmless once it had passed through the digestive system of the reindeer. This allowed them to experience the hallucinogenic without the death usually involved in the deal.

Goethi, here, is giving Hiccup a similar brew to help him sleep. The side effects, usually, are very strange and vivid dreams.

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Yes, I've fed Hiccup piss. I was not joking when I said I was an evil overlord.

Also, I would like to point out that while I consider the devotion Hiccup has for Astrid to be beautiful, what he actually did, while not terribly bad, I consider rather strange and creepy. I hope I brought it out properly. This is still my favourite chapter, somehow.

We are almost at the end, people. Hold on tight.

23. Extreme Position

A massive warning goes with this chapter: It is a battle, there is blood and death. Violence, people, serious violence. This chapter is not child-friendly, be warned. Skip to the bottom if you want a basic overview. And Hiccup goes utterly freaking batshit **_insane**_**. This is not because he is actually possessed. Remember the medicine from the previous chapter? Yeah â€|**

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 21 - Extreme Position_

**When the final result is expected to be a compromise, it is often prudent to start from an extreme position.**

â€• _**John Maynard Keynes**_

The sun set behind the thirty ships, exactly the amount Hiccup had told them. All of Berk's fires were lit, all the huts looking merrily lived in and happily preparing for a quiet night from their vantage point on the hill.

The ships came from the South East - again as Hiccup had said, and the last place anyone would have expected them. They anchored off Thor's beach, and small boats began to drift towards Berk like sharks.

Astrid stood next to Bertha and Wolftooth's teams, three battalions ready; she was in command in Hiccup's absence. A few people had been disappointed that he and Toothless would not be fighting, but had been silenced by an axe-blade to the throat. Specifically hers.

Everyone else had heard the word 'fever' and needed to be told nothing else. Astrid thought they probably all assumed he'd taken ill on his voyage - they could assume what they wanted. She wasn't

telling them he was injured and helpless. She didn't trust anyone at the moment.

And the news was arriving to them through the terrors and through their few riders.

The nadder snorted against Astrid's hair, and she scratched her under her chin. Adderbite had decided to join the battle, and Clover had come, too. Stormfly was with the babies, and the majority of the dragons were there â€“ but they were discovering some amazing things, even now. Nightmares, it would seem, left the young to their males. Night furies too. Nadders and gronkles on the other hand, seemed to favour both parents or the female taking the lead nurturing role.

So Fireworm was there. And so was the female night fury. Astrid gave her a significant look.

"Thank you for doing this, girl," she murmured. "We will take care of your young as long as you need. I promise."

The night fury snorted, and butted her head against Astrid's shoulder, gesture soon followed by Clover and Adderbite. She felt bolstered and ready, the war-paint fresh on her skin and giving her courage.

Berk wouldn't fall. She had her husband's pride and honour in her hands, and she would not let him down.

"They're coming," someone whispered to her right, and she tensed. A hush fell over her battalion, twenty men and women, all with a dragon beside them they could not ride, but who would fight beside them. Astrid brought out Brisinga, blood smeared from her blood oath bringing out the words on her. She signalled, everyone doing the same and being careful to keep their weapons low so that they would not reflect the light from the distant fires of the village. The night fury seemed skittish for a moment, but then Astrid gave her a look.

"These are like your teeth," she whispered. "They only come out when we fight, and we only fight our enemies. You are not our enemy."

The dragon actually gave a slow nod, looking at the other dragons, who had grown accustomed to being around the variety of sharp pointy objects their Viking companions favoured. Astrid wished for a second that she had time to properly get to know this lovely female.

The dragons went stiff; the humans followed suit and snapped forward. Even before they could see or hear them themselves, they knew that the main attacking force had reached the decoy of the empty village. Astrid felt her back tense, the usual excitement of battle tempered by all they had to lose today; the women, children and non-fighters on the beach, the baby dragons, barely days old. And her beautiful, beautiful Hiccup. She didn't know if Stoick was right, but in that moment, he was all she could think of.

Then there were the footsteps. Clashing metal steps, telling them already before they even saw that their enemies were heavily armoured. But every single fighter on the allied clans' side was clad in some of Hiccup's miraculous chainmail which some of the men had begun calling Gleipnir - Astrid raised the hood on her mail,

swallowing and allowing the battle-readiness to sweep over her.

This was it.

The warriors came into the light. They were all wearing the typical dark armour of the Berserkers, blackened cloth adorning the armour and the blank helmets, some completely covering their faces, some open to their chin and eyes. Nothing of their face could be seen in the harsh contrast of light from the fires, and Astrid almost shuddered at the image they portrayed, as if their helmets were empty, and they were drougrs come to haunt them.

A scream arose from them as they stormed the halls. There were many of them, and no doubt many more attempting to surround the area. The actual flying troops had been dispatched to pick-and-drop duty, where the darkness their enemies were using to sneak up on a rear-attack would be used to their advantage as they would never see the dragons coming, but the dragons would most certainly see them.

Astrid held her breath. Soon, now. She raised her left hand.

The troops breaking into the halls regrouped at the centre, furious screams and yells being heard. A hall was set on fire, then another. They had known this would happen - it was why all the valuables had been removed. Astrid barely breathed as she waited for the next phase of the plan to snap into place.

The gronkles led by Farthog suddenly rose up. They began spewing their incredibly rapid fire, lava leaking out of their mouths. From Astrid's high vantage point, she could see the wall of quickly hardening, deathly hot lava being erected around the village. The troops within were summarily trapped.

"Stoick!" one of them screamed. "You coward! And where is Hiccup! Where is he so I can bathe in his blood and that of his night fury!"

Astrid snarled. The night fury beside her did the same.

"NOW!" she snapped, watching as Fireworm rose into the sky in an incandescent arc, and all of them ran screaming down the hill, the nadders shooting endless strings of tail spikes and impaling men before they could even look up and shriek. The female night fry took off, screaming the typical call that sent many Berserkers sprawling.

"That one is mine!" screamed the mad voice, and Astrid knew it was Dagur, and that his adult name was aptly given.

Berserker warriors began to surround them, and Astrid, flanked by Clover and Adderbite, began fighting one of the bloodiest battles of her life. She swung Brisinga until it shone red like the rubies of its namesake, cursing when it got stuck in a rib-cage and Clover had to bail her out of an attack at her back. Her accuracy with throwing knives was tested, and though she was not as good as her betrothed, there were not a few eyes she hit, watching the empty helmets suddenly spew blood through their sight holes and the hit men screamed and clawed at their face.

One man tried to bring Clover down, going for his leg, and almost

managing as the dragon was occupied covering Adderbite's flank, and Astrid particularly enjoyed killing this one, trapping him in a bola first, and then hacking his head off with his own hatchet. How dare he go after the dragons in her team?

The screams and yell of battle around her raged as she sprinted across the battlefield, her eyes sharper than usual, her ears more alert than ever, every single sense in tune to the nuances of her surroundings. The smell of blood and sweat was a boost, an additional stimulation to the already whirring fire of her anger, and thirst for revenge.

These people had come into her home, planning to take their lives, their happiness.

Dagur wanted to bathe in Hiccup's blood. She would bathe in his first.

A bottleneck had been left open in the lava wall around the village, and the Berserker warriors were being forced out of it, being felled like so many ants in a line by pecking birds. The Hooligans dropped into the enclosed village from the sky, dragons coming down with them claws cocked and jaws ready, and began setting fire to their own halls in order to smoke their prey out - or burn them alive, if they had taken refuge inside. A smile began to spread on Astrid's face as she heard more and more screams, men wearing the dark armour screeching as the fire took them - or the dragons did.

The allied clan warriors were all clad in the Gleipnir armour, and the beautiful metal shone like stars, making them almost seem like they were blessed, the blood in Astrid's veins pumping all the harder for the thought.

Their's was a righteous battle - they were betrayed, attacked by allies who sheared through a treaty like they'd tried to shear through their village and their lives. They were on the Gods' side, and the Gods were on theirs. Hiccup called her Asta - she would not let him down.

The battle lulled within the area she was in as she unstuck her axe from inside a helmet, more blood and body matter dropping onto the once-green grass. Everything shone red and golden from the fires and the slaughter, and Astrid screamed when she saw some of Berk's good men dead, rushing to the aid of a fellow fighter - Hoark! Oh Asgard, Hoark! - whose hand had been cut off and whose opponent was now raising his axe against for the final blow.

The armoured hilt of Brisinga went directly into his abdomen, and Astrid felt such satisfaction at hearing the pained yelp and loss of air whooshing out of the man's mouth. She yelled at Clover to get Hoark over the wall - the dragons had all been shown the healers' hidden positions, and Clover took off, Hoark in his claws. With a snarl, Adderbite chomped down on the man, but Astrid screamed again - this time in horror, as he twisted away just on time and brought his axe down on her wing.

Adderbite went down, and it was all Astrid could do to throw her last knife at him so that he wouldn't kill her. She missed, which made her roar in anger, but she had just enough time to climb onto the dragon's prone body and launch herself at him, Brisinga raised

high.

His weapon could not measure up - never, ever could. Brisinga had a longer reach, tougher metal, and the genius construction of her wonderful Hiccup's hand. Within moments his blade was chipped, and even as he screamed and went into a battle frenzy, he could not catch her. When she knocked his helmet off, she realised that she was facing Dagur himself, and her blood boiled to the point of hatred like she had never felt before.

"You fetid wretch," she hissed at him, angrier than she had ever been. This man was the cause of it all. This man was the reason all this was happening; the reason she was not with Hiccup right now, the reason good men were dead, the reason she had betrayed Hiccup. He was the reason she could not be happy with Stormfly, and the reason the Thing had been so hard, and this Snoggletog was going to dawn on a Berk drenched in blood.

"Oh ho," he replied, laughing as if she had just asked him what colour his boots were, "I like your language! I will make sure to use your mouth thoroughly once we are done with this place!"

Her body went rigid at his remark, and what had before been mad frenzy became concentrated fury. He had proposed to touch her. He would die by her hand.

She began to attack with alacrity rather than keeping the defensive. She snarled and bit at him, taking out chunks of his armour and taking first blood, ignoring his screams and splitting his weapon open. She gave him a predatory smile just as she raised Brisinga, ready to take his head where he was lying prone.

Adderbite gave a gargle, but she was too late. Astrid was only in time to turn and see both men coming at her; she kicked and bit, she disarmed them, but they overwhelmed her and held her by both arms, pushed her down to her knees, wrenching her hair until she screamed in frustrated fury. Dagur stood up, seemingly unconcerned with the battle raging around them as he ordered the two men to hold her still, and keep her kneeling.

"Yes, yes I like you," he said, with that demon shine in his eyes, like one of Helheim's own creatures, laughing and throwing his head back with a mirth that was unnatural and insane. "I want this one. I want this one later. I really, really like her!"

"I don't quite agree."

Warm, sticky, viscous liquid suddenly erupted around Astrid. She looked to the side, incredulous and dismayed, even as the grip of the two men on her relented and she shot up.

She was covered in the two men's blood as their heads rolled away, her hair sodden against her scalp, stomach lurching as she spat some of it that got in her mouth. She could not get her eyes away from the lowering arc of the flaming sword that had done the deed, however, because Hiccup was standing right there, wearing the trousers she had left him in on the gurney, now blood-drenched, his sword, and nothing else. There was not a scratch on him, but Astrid could see his fever bright eyes as he looked around, seeming almost bored.

Oh dear _gods_ what was he doing here!

"Hiccup!" Dagur yelled, taking his sword out too and looking at her betrothed with a happiness and hunger that was usually reserved for vicious, cruel creatures that dwelling the deeper reaches of the darkest realms. "I was waiting for you! I've been waiting for you _forever_!"

He licked his blade, the whites of his eyes showing.

"I will _enjoy_ this!" he growled in pleasure.

An arm grabbed her and jerked her backwards. She was about to maim when she heard Snotlout's voice.

"Move, move back, it's about to get ugly!" he hissed.

"What are you doing! We have to go help!" she growled, ready to break his arms and ribs if necessary. He didn't manage to get her too far away, but as soon as they were behind an upturned cart, he threw them both to the ground and huffed, looking almost frightened.

"Trust me, he has things under controlâ€| now where is that damned â€| there it is!" Snotlout shot away and Astrid followed like a shadow. She saw him grab an hour glass and shake it to empty it. Once it was clear on one end, he raced back and signaled to Hiccup, who was apparently more lucid than she thought.

Or more feverish. What was happening?

"You may want to look away," Snotlout said, and there was a tremble in his voice that made Astrid's stomach rise to her throat.

"Like fuck," she hissed, turning back to watch as Hiccup and Dagur circled each other. Whatever this was, whatever was happening; she would be there. And if necessary, she would bathe Brisinga in more blood.

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Hiccup awoke slowly, unsure what was happening. He had a sense of impending â€| something. As if he'd been expected somewhere, and he'd fallen asleep when he'd only meant to rest his eyes. There was something resting on his chest, and it sort of reminded him of sweetness and light. There were voices and murmurs and campfire noises and smells.

When he opened his eyes he felt like he'd been suckerpunched. The world around him was awash with colours, beautiful and fragrant. The campfire was letting out music which he could see, clear as they were flowers waving in the wind on a spring day. The wind whispered to him, the dryads singing songs that he could suddenly understand; there was the noise of clashing, somewhere. There was something happening, the dryads told him, and he needed to be there.

He sat up; the weight on his chest turned out to be a sweet little girl, and Hiccup knew her right away. This was his child. His.

He stood the rest of the way, putting the child down. His body felt strange, a mix of the inside and outside. He could feel all of the

air around him, hear - hear for miles around. He could see the wind moving in the trees as it left bright lighted paths for him to follow. His eyes didn't need to focus to see in the darkness - but he could not tell where his body ended and the air began.

He'd become part of the air, and the Aesir were speaking to him through the taste of the noises and the smell of the colours.

But he could hear clashes ¦ and he knew one thing. The dryads were right. That is where he needed to be.

The prosthetic was loose and he tightened it, forgetting about it as soon as it began to work properly. A pile of his belongings was sitting neatly beside him, and he took up Smoulder - he would need nothing else tonight. He could taste it on the campfire crackles. Quietly, he covered his little child, and then waved his hand over her, watching as the lines of colour he drew in the air settled over her. She would be protected.

He began moving towards the clashes, the lines of colour in the trees telling him which direction to go as the noises made multifaceted ripples in his surroundings. He moved rapidly, aware of every stone and every branch, every root and every leaf; but they were not his target, not his goal. He had to move forward, go the place where he was needed.

He knew he arrived there when the colours were everywhere. The numbers rising in the air around him told him all he needed to know, the wind crying out and tasting of blood and metal, screams and groans tasting bitter. A wall that should not have been there blocked his way, but he lit Smoulder and then one of his brothers came.

The blue nadder allowed him on and he scaled the wall. There was a sea of moving bodies like moving waves, and when he was halfway over, he jumped off.

He could feel the slick grass under his toes in the same way that he could feel the grain of the wood pop, a few meters away, as the fire ate. A man came at him - but he wasn't man. He was a drougr, his hair an array of serpents that rose and writhed against his skull. and he watched him come, the very air around him crying in protest as he passed through it, the vileness of this creature offending the creation of the Aesir.

The armour around him flashed, and then he knew what stars sounded like as the warriors around him shone brightly - those were his men. His. These ¦ these others were to be destroyed.

The first one got Smoulder in the face - it was a pity, because the vile blood got on his arms. He pushed it off with a foot to the chest and watched it writhe as it defiled the soil with its fluids. The ground would need to be burned too. Two men were fighting against one of His. He quickly moved forward, sensing the blue dragon following him. He slashed one of the vile creatures' legs off, letting him fall like a felled trunk. The other turned and screamed, but he needed to move forward, because the dryads were still singing, and he couldn't waste too much time on these vermin.

Bubbles began rising around him as he watched the second man die, Smoulder flaming out of his chest. His sword's flame did not

disappear, and he could smell her singing, like waves on a rock. The bubbles around him turned colour, drifting with every clash and noise, joining the rivers of colourful noise in their brightness. All around him, he could see the shining warriors who were his brothers, the ones he was fighting with, to protect the city. He knew one of them would drink blood tonight. They would not fail, and they would not fall, and all the creatures that the fetid ice-giant who controlled Niflheim had sent would be sent back in pieces.

He walked forward, dragons coming in and out of his peripheral vision, which was all around him. and the battle noises got louder as the colours got brighter.

Something told him to duck - he saw it, the flash of colour and movement of bubbles, and he stepped the side and brought Smoulder upwards, impaling a man who had been attempting to kill him from behind. He was drenched in the foul being's blood, Smoulder wrenched from his hands with the thing's own weight, and the horrid insect legs twitched and writhed when Hiccup kicked its empty head to kill it, Smoulder coming out with a squelch that Hiccup felt to be slimy and sore on a place that was not his skin.

His legs were suddenly full of an energy he had not previously noticed, the area around him moving out of his way so that he could run forward, and then taking a hatchet out of a corpse he slashed at another two creatures, one half a mad wolf, the other a creature of slime and hatred that smelt of grave and dead fish. One of the warriors of his ilk, one in the shining Aesir armour, came forward to him and spoke, but he could not fully understand, not when the eyes on the back of his head were telling him to turn. And so he did, swinging the hatchet and letting it go, and watching with satisfaction as the weapon sang its life and satisfaction, colours rising and tasting of victory, the creature's fluids rising in an arc to echo the weapon and haze their surroundings in red surrender.

"Hiccup!"

The words seemed to coalesce in his mind, and he waved his head, looking back at his brother, shining in the light of battle. He recognised this man - he was a treasured ally, and he knew him well.

"Hiccup, what the fuck are you doing here? You're not even wearing any armour! Shit!"

He pushed his ally away, because he felt them coming. He leapt up, landed on their broad weapon, pushing the handle out of the creature's hand with his weight. His elbow landed on their throat, and the crack tasted incredibly strange, like eating sea slugs.

He took the weapon up, a sword that was large and unnatural, forged by a goblin who had never forged in his life. He drove the abomination of metal into the other creature's chest, invoking Thor and asking the blacksmith of the gods to punish all those in his path for the insult to their art.

He screamed then when he saw more of his brothers in the metal given to them by the stars, bleeding. He rushed forward, collecting a spear, and rammed it into a creature of disgust and wonder, who had

been wielding a single-bladed axe about to behead a woman on the ground who he knew was precious. He looked down at her, and knew her name was Phlegma, and that she was important.

Fire began to descend from the sky before his eyes, balls of flame engulfing enemies around him, and he screamed in elated response, raising Smoulder and running forward once again. He thought the arc one creatures' arm made was beautiful, the numbers it spoke perfect for its death. Another's leg sung of mud and pain. Another's head only screamed, tasting of bitter ale and munched grass.

He didn't stop, the horrid, putrid fluids of these monsters covering him as he walked and ran forward, never stopping, never pausing. He was aware of a dear ally by his side, the one who had spoken before in many languages and many voices merging together in his head.

"Vile monster from the pits of Hel's rotted breast," he hissed at a monster whose body would not surrender his sword back to him. The creature gargled and frothed with information his mind refused to be corrupted by, and then his sword came free when he planted his fingers into the wound and tugged. The thin continuous blade was lit on fire again, and walked up to another drougr, bathed in armour of darkness, never hesitating to spill its guts. Behind it were two familiar faces, precious faces, dressed in the armour with a now muted light - it sang of sadness and loss, as the two faces were gone. The bodies hung from the ground with spears through them.

"Oddar â€“ shit, and the bakerâ€“!" the companion spoke. He snarled, now anger and contempt taking the place of the calm hunger for justice that had been curling his chest with warmth and fur-like reassurance.

Now the real hatred unfurled. His heart did not beat, it moved, flowing like a river with the forced of the water behind and in front, hitting the rocks and biting into the banks. The fires rose and spoke to him. He needed to go that way.

There was a foul voice, rising. One he knew, one he recognised as the cause for all this. His feet were told where to go by the ground, and when all the bubbles began dancing in light of pure red, he knew he'd arrived there.

The most precious one was being forced to sit, to scream as others touched her.

Something burst in his chest, then, a clarity that was unlike the previous one. He remembered things, things that were important; laws, rules, regulations. Things he could to punish he who was daring to have other men touch her, he who was daring to look at her.

"Find an hourglass. In the shed over there," he told his ally. "Take her when she's free. Stay where I can see you." Then he moved forward.

Smoulder was singing. She was begging to bite, begging to do what his fateful dragon brother could not, because of the tiny lives that were being nurtured and loved where the colours ran free. So he raised her, letting Smoulder sing to her heart's content, cutting the air

and the colours, and finally moving through the black, dull heads of the creatures who dared touch his most precious one. Forseti spoke in his ear, telling him what to do as he watched his ally take his Beloved away.

The vile one spoke. The words were a howling of hisses and the bite of a snake, the punch of nausea and the fear of sting.

"I will enjoy this!" he finally understood from his ululating mouth, the curse of Niflheim already rising from the ground in so many empty, colourless tendrils, ready to take this maddest abomination down. Hiccup watched him circle, and followed suit, watching as the poor stupid creature did not realise that the fingers of its death were rising up to take it. He felt a presence behind him, the same one who had cleared his mind and given him the laws and rules he needed. He began to listen.

"You are the new leader of the Berserkers," he repeated after Forseti, the goddess of justice telling him what to say.

"Ahaaa!" the monster laughed, throwing his head back, his axe weapon mangled and chipped, his handle almost broken, and he immediately knew that his most Beloved had done that, because Brisinga's music was rising from that weapon's wounds. "I am!"

"Then I challenge you. You will duel with me. The winner will take all," he replied. Forseti's voice was sweet and reassuring, and he knew he would win. "I am the heir of this tribe, and I invoke the right to challenge you - to the death."

"HAha! Why should I accept! Why should I care! All around us is the battle to the death, it's never ending, never stopping! And ours will be a battle to the death too - your death, and my battle! I will bathe in your blood, I will wear your skin against mine. I will find your dragon, and I will steal it, rob it of its spirit until it obeys only me, or else I will kill it and - or maybe I will keep you alive, keep you alive long enough to watch me kill all those you love."

The creature's face writhed into what could be called a smile if it were human, the tendrils of blackness increasing around it as it spoke and signed his fate in his own ink.

"And then maybe I will make you watch as I take that woman you just saved. Yes, I will make you watch, because that one is yours isn't she? I saw how she looked at you, and I know that when she's screaming as I break her in, your eyes will not be able to look away, no, they won't. Not as I do to her what you want to do yourself, make her squeal like a pig and cry out like a whoreâ€|"

Forseti screamed in his ear, and then his eyes moved to the hourglass which had been flipped the moment the challenge had been issued. Enough sand had passed through.

"You have accepted my challenge!" he screaming, swinging his sword around in an arch and bringing it down with all the strength Thor had lent him. "You take my challenge as heir of Berk for our own as leader of this tribe of monstrous creatures from the depths of Niflheim! The time necessary has elapsed and the challenge is in place! The law states thus and may Forseti curse you!"

The being moved back, trying to block his blows. Hiccup screamed as Smoulder began to cut into his enemy, leaving fiery trails of broken song behind, his opponent counter attacking with his sword and cutting through the colours and bubbles with a wake of blackness. The men around them could not approach, the shining warriors who were his brothers refused to break a circle, and the disgusting filth from the depths of a cesspit either being held back, or fearfully cowering away from the combat and his sword.

"Ahaaa! I will take your life, and it will be worth a thousand songs, a million edda, and the generations to come will know my name, Dagur the Conqueror!"

Forseti whispered in his ears to move right, and he did so, watching the blade cut down beside him in a slow boring arc. He watched the other's mans face change colour and expression as Smoulder approached the soft underbelly, breaking through with a squelch and a call of rejoicing spring colours. He twisted the trusted sword, watching as the blood moved from green to red, watched the colour rise into the air and congeal into a blessing and a curse.

"Hiccup!" his most precious one screamed, and then he knew Forseti had whispered something, but he did not catch it. Right away he looked down, watching as the blade of a small knife shone up at him with a beautiful light before it sunk into his arm. It sang of fire and light as it went, called to Thor of his beautiful taste and the lovely smell of his spirit. Hiccup smiled at it, looking back up at the nothing disappearing before his eyes.

"The gods are on my side," he replied, knowing that he was smiling at this creature, wanting it to know that the knife was his, now, too.
"I cannot feel a shit."

Thor laughed somewhere in the background and more fireballs fell from Asgard, throwing up in flames the few halls still standing. All was awash in bright white light and heat, the smells and numbers and a colours mingling as he stepped back, still feeling the happy smile on his face, the elation and lightness in his chest, and he pushed the vile creature off his beautiful sword. The thing gargled - Dagur, the deranged and dying - and Hiccup looked down at him dispassionately. The gods were waiting, just as he was, to see what the judgement was, what the outcome of the challenge would be.

"Are you Outcasts?" He asked, laughing. "Are you? Do you have Viking law or are you lawless monsters crawled out of the fetid lakes of Hess' islands?" Dagur's song began to fade, the colours around him being swallowed by the greedy blackness he exuded. "I wonder what you want. You have wives and children? Or do you come into the world full-formed, like that," he felt the sneer of disgust trickle down the back of his throat like a fine wine, his disdain and righteousness making arcs in the air and feeling correct. "What do you want for them if you had any? Do you want the protection of the treaty, or do you want death, rape and destruction?"

He looked a few of the creatures in the multi-coloured eyes, most wavering with fear as he invoked Forseti's power amongst them.

"Because I can give you both. I can give you death at the tip of this

blade, or I can offer you the treaty!"

He slammed his metal foot down on the creature's chest as it tried to gargle, and it gave a whine. Dagur the dying flailed an arm as if it was trying to rise.

"Are you creatures like this, or creatures like us? Decide now." he pointed towards the hour glass in his ally's hand with his sword. The drops of crimson that left from its tip floated away, joining the bubbles around them and beating like a heart.

"No!" one of them screamed. "Spare us!" The creature threw itself onto the ground and Forseti sang beside him, her voice high and rising. Another sank beside him, then another, and another still. The colours around them began to blacken as the creature on the ground trembled and writhed, trying to rise, trying to die, failing at both.

"You will take the treaty, and the punishment of breaking it," he repeated, Forseti's voice so very clear and pure, like mountain water gargling from the source. "Or you will die here and now, by my hand. I will stain the ground with you all."

"We'll take the treaty!" the first one who spoke said again. He moved towards him with his metal leg first, kicking Dagur the dying as he went, the impatience in him, blood of his enemy smeared on him as he refused to die, wishing the time flowing around him would not flow so slowly, the sand-grains in the hourglass dancing like light rain on a windy night, time bending this way and that as the black tendrils rose, trying to take the stubborn creature who refused to go.

"On whose authority do you speak?" he asked the speaker, who was slowly melting away from the shadows of its monstrous form, taking on human form again now that Forseti had touched him, and he was on the side of the righteous again.

"I am Callous, Dagur's cousin, and next in line," he replied, and even his voice suddenly tasted of sense and reason. He felt Forseti smile.

"What is your title?" he asked, and looked at him with a tilted head, trying to read the colours the gods were showing him. They rose in wet waves off him. like touches of paint smearing the night sky in summer.

"I do not yet have one," he said, and his voice wavered like a human. All the others began to throw their weapons down, and their heads came off, thrown to the slick red grass, to reveal men and women, their monstrous aspects melting away as they shed their folly and knelt in front of the goddess of justice.

"You will have one, after this," he told him, looking around at the changing people, the quiet suddenly swallowing the music as the metal stopped singing and the air stopped tasting of red ripeness. "So, you all. You take this man as your leader, and you take his word as your law."

A number of noises rose, words and murmurs and yells and please. He looked around at them in disgust, waiting. Then he turned towards man in front of him again.

"Do they take you?" he asked, tilting his head. The man nodded, seeming almost terrified.

"Does anyone dissent?" he asked the newly formed humans again.

"I DO!"

A screaming, maddening cry rose as man made of slime and mud rushed forward, weapon raised and ignoring the pleas to stop from the new humans of his own ilk. "I am Philip the Jilter, and I will fight until my dying-"

A weapon swung right into his face, the pointed ball-head of a mace embedding itself into his skull with a crunch. His body rose to the air and fell as his feet kept running while his head was blown backwards. One of his allies, dressed in the shining armour, held the bloodied mace up. She spit at the corpse, wild blonde hair dotted with red.

"I hate jilters," she hissed, kicking him. "No real man would have a name like Philip, anyway."

Hiccup returned to the rest of them, watching the remaining monsters kneel with little care. "Do you refuse the treaty, then? Tell me now, so that I may kill you." The music of the night quieted for a moment, muted by the sense of something hidden in the night. But then it lifted again with the consent of the fires and the heat. "Very well. You are all our prisoners. Drop your weapons. Stand. Move to the wall. Those who refuse need only tell me so that I may have mercy on you."

Slowly, the creatures began to shed their vestiges of horror, parts of their demonic beings falling to the ground, leaving limbs and mantels of blackened, gnarled claws behind. They moved in a trickle towards the place he had indicated. They did not move again.

He turned towards the one still on the ground, Dagur the dying but not dead yet. His eyes were white all around, and there was a choking sense of red clogging in him that was drowning all the rest, and still he did not succumb to the black rising around him to take him away. He looked at the creature with interest, wondering how he could get rid of it now. They were no longer monsters, they were now men and women, and needed a leader of that same ilk - this one would not do anymore. And he had won his duel, won this being's life. He needed to put it out of its misery.

Then another voice rose, one he knew well because it had been born between his fingers. He looked around to it, and his most dearly Beloved was coming forward, bringing the sweet voice of ruby red with it. It was a voice that matched the same shade of red as the gargling, snarled knot in the Dagur creature in front him, and he knew that it could now be no other way.

He looked at her for a moment. She was a creature of beauty forged by the gods.

"Asta," he called, knowing that was her name. "I think your axe is singing for his head. You must appease it - it is what's fair."

"With pleasure," she replied, and the smile on her face was one that belonged on no face but hers, where the beauty met the war and the blood of Freya and Freyr ran deep and combined. Brisinga screamed in pleasure as she came down, and the arc it left behind was the most brilliant colour yet, piercing through the blackness snarling the monster lying prone in front of them, dividing the man from the monster in one motion. Then the monster took it all, swallowing all the remains in blackness, and there was nothing to worry about anymore.

The colours and songs were muted again, as they had been in the sweet child's mind when he'd woken up. His ally came close, Asta coming closer. The fluid of the creatures he had killed needed to be removed from his skin before it contaminated him. Asta was trying to stop his movement to pull out the blade - but it would remain there until he could wash the ichor off.

The men and women standing where he had told them to had not moved, and he could feel that the night was pleased, and that the dryads had begun to sing of calm and rest again. He looked around, and amongst his star-clad allies he spotted another all-important one, tall and imposing. With a nod, he waved an arm towards the newly formed humans.

"I leave them to you," he said. "Teach them how to be human again."

Then he let himself be guided out of the burning labyrinth of halls, singing their joy in heat and smell of happiness. Asta and his ally stayed close, and he allowed himself to be walked back the way he'd come, colours rising in the sky now sweeter hues, like flowers dotting the night. He allowed himself to be washed and tended to by her gentle fingers and his ally's strong arms. Once the ichor had been removed, he allowed her to remove the blade and then an old woman who smelt of time walked up to him to look him in his eye for a long time.

She used thread made of deer blood to close the hole in his texture, shutting out the colour and taste that was escaping his body, and he was then made to lie down, a worried child calmed and put on his belly, her eyes so much like those of Asta that he just knew this child was hers. The dryads sang of sleep and rest. The child looked at him with teary, sleepy eyes that lulled him, and he put an arm around her, watching the music in her breath become dreams and float on the colourful wind. This child was his, and so she was theirs. He knew, now, that it was true, and that as he saw the colours fading into the quiet, muted black of the night time, absorbed by the scales of his battle brother who had come to curl up around him, that the gods had fulfilled their will.

It would be well. The colours whispered promises of rest and quiet, mellow taste of peace. He closed his eyes, and let himself listen to their murmured entreaties to rest.

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Snotlout was standing next to Stoick's hut, dazed and confused. The world was buzzing around him, and he was out of breath simply from trying to keep up. The calm after the fight seemed almost impossible,

like a dream, rather than reality. Dawn had broken, but this Snoggletog was a hushed and tired one. The battle had gone from being one of the most dangerous things to hit Berk in a while to one of the ... most surreal experiences of his life.

Feeling like he'd received a blow to the head, and still reeling from what he'd seen, he stared into space, trying to make sense of it. The moment Toothless had come bounding up to him, a crying little girl in the gurney and nothing else, blood had rushed to his head and it seemed that it had never come back down until the end of the fight, leaving him lightheaded.

He'd raced into the woods, up the wooden paths in the darkness, swearing when he caught roots and fell in potholes sometimes to the knee. The smoke and choking smell of scorched human flesh had already permeated the otherwise quiet holt that divided the village from the rest of the island.

He'd stopped on the hill looking over the main village to catch his breath and had become involuntarily trapped by the horror of the sight. Half the halls were in flames, but that was nothing new. Sure, that was nothing new. The dragons had routinely kept the carpenters busy up until last Summer. His mother was going to be spitting mad they'd lost the hall again.

But those were ∞ stupidities. Little things he caught first because he was used to them. The grass was green, the sky was blue and the hall's on fire.

The rest of it, though ∞ it beggered belief. He had heard rumour of the Berserker warriors. Heard of the origin of their name, the things that it was rumoured they did. Witnessing it first hand was not something he was going to forget any time soon.

There were bodies ∞ everywhere. Literally everywhere. He had gone in to a few meetings and knew what the main battleplan was, so he hadn't been surprised by the new wall that surrounded the main plaza and the halls around it. The fires in all the halls that had been caught in that circle of imprisonment were almost all blazing, and that gave enough light to watch.

One Berserker had been killing people with his bare hands, tearing their throat out like they were made of cheese. Another one was covered in blood from head to toe, and Snotlout'd found out why as he watched because he'd overpowered a man - a Meathead - trapped him facing down and then passed a pike right through his body, butt-cheek up. Evidently, Hiccup's metal could not be breached; this madman had gotten creative. Other, various levels of mutilation and atrocity were seen in other bodies Snotlout's eyes passed over - nearly all of them had had their mail ripped back first, judging by their positions, but all of them had brutality in common. And while there hadn't been many of their allies as the Berserker bodies outnumbered them ∞ there had been just enough to make his blood boil.

And on the other side, Snotlout still remembered the shock of seeing ∞ the Berserker bodies. Some were just lying there, dead. But there had been some other bodies that were just ∞ discarded, like rag dolls.

Snotlout had descended the hill at that point, worried out of his

mind about his cousin, roaming - half naked and delirious in this hell hole. The first thing that happened as soon as he reached the foot of the hill was that a man, foaming at the mouth, came at him with a mace, and Snotlout had cursed him and all his ancestry for the ten minutes it took to knock him out. The moment he raced for the walls, he began to look around, hoping against hope that Hiccup had stopped here, or that someone had spotted him and dragged him off. While there were fighters outside, they were mostly Hooligans and their allies, picking off the Berserkers who left through the tiny entrance they'd left, or in line to get dropped in by dragons. Immediately, Snotlout rushed towards the one manning the dragons dropping off their folk.

"Ballchain!" he yelled, almost out of breath. "Ballchain, get me over!"

"What's wrong?" The burly blond asked, holding tight onto a nightmare's snout.

"Hiccup," he gasped. "He snuck out of the safe beach - I followed his trail here - I have to get over that wall!"

"What? He didn't pass through here. And there's no other way over this wall except the Gap - and no one's going into the gap. They only come out. To die."

"Look, it's Hiccup." Ballchain just looked at him. "He can have any one of these dragons eating out of his hand, in seconds, and you know that." The blond Viking looked suddenly worried sick. "Let me over, man; now! I need to get in there, and get my cousin out. At least give him backup!"

"Get on," the man growled, and Snotlout quickly hopped onto the nightmare, staving off the colourful array of emotion riding this particular breed of dragon generated in him. As soon as they were over the wall, the nightmare tipped its neck and Snotlout jumped off - obviously they couldn't fly that low for long, or they'd be shot down.

It was mayhem in there. It was like Ragnarok had come instead of Snoggletog as a gift-wrapped surprise from Hel to Odin. The fire gave great visibility, but the walls cut the circulation off, so the stifling heat felt like the inside of the forge or the bakery. He was tempted to tip the mail hood back, but that went clean out of his mind when a sword swiped at the back of his neck seconds after his feet touched ground.

Luckily, the blow was wide. The blow was wide because Bertha had her morning star stuck in the man's skull.

"Evening, Jorgensen," she said gamely. "I thought you were confined making tea with the kiddies and distressed ladies." She managed to free her weapon with a final tug, shaking it slightly to get rid of any residue.

Snotlout gaped at her for a few seconds, aware that he looked like a stupid fish, but unable to decide whether to take the risk or not. Still, the Bogs had seemed to like Hiccup.

"My cousin snuck out. He's somewhere in here," he hissed. He

spotted an assailant over her shoulder and tugged her down, picking up the sword that had missed his head and sticking it back into Berserker hands. Or abdomens. He didn't care for details. "I have to find him and get him out of here!"

"Wasn't he running a fever?" Bertha ask, Snotlout following her as she rushed forward. Three Berserkers fell by the time Snotlout had enough breath to answer.

"That's why I have to get him out of here! He can't take a battle right now, but he's stubborn and-"

"Nothing new, boy! I haven't seen him, so stop wasting time with me and go find him! DAUGHTER!"

"WHAT!"

Snotlout almost jumped, his battle-ready senses making him swerve to find the voice, and he saw Cami winking in and out of focus on top of her changewing.

"Apparently Jorgensen here is looking for his cousin, who got in here, he says!"

"Fuck!" the girl replied. "Hop on!"

Snotlout had little say in the matter as the Bog woman grabbed his fringe and janked him until he got on behind her, and then they shot up.

"This doesn't increase visibility!" he coughed, the wind blowing smoke onto them.

"Not for us it doesn't, idiot, but it does for her, and she's safe because no one can see her!" Cami hissed back, breathing thinly as the fire-smoke rose up and almost choked them. "Find Hiccup, girl!"

The dragon gave a quiet rumble, almost inaudible above the clashes and screams of battle. The moments where they were not blanketed in the noxious smoke, he could see the allied clans' fighters glittering in the firelight, the Berserkers looking even more ghoulish in comparison - but that gave them the added ability to hide better in the dark. The armour that was protecting the fighters was also giving them away.

The dragon under them suddenly gave a growl and dived, and Cami kicked him off suddenly without preamble when they were close to ground.

"Can't stay, have to rejoin forces! Get in there!" She yelled, and then a whoosh and the dragon was gone, the breed's ability to disappear essential as Cami used it to take out as many of the enemies as possible in her role of protecting the air troops.

Snotlout looked around quickly, hoping to spot the reason why he'd been thrown off the dragon, and his blood went cold as soon as he did.

Hiccup was looking down at a man like he was in interesting insect on the ground. He was covered in blood from head to toe, which made

Snotlout swear through his teeth as he began to approach as directly as discretion allowed him. His fear mounted as he realised Hiccup was wearing nothing at all — he was in the pair of long, sleeping linen trousers they'd brought him in on the gurney. Otherwise, he seemed completely — he didn't even have a shoe on!

"Hiccup!" he yelled, then had to stop in order to fend off another man who, alerted by his yell, turned and came at him. The man's sword came down in a wide arc and Snotlout caught it with the hilt of his hammer, the metal ringing against the gronkle iron core Hiccup had built into the centre of it. The man's surprise betrayed him, and Snotlout managed to trip him and smashed the hammer against the man's helmet.

He turned, racing towards his cousin, and he was on time to see the normally mild man not bat an eye as he kicked the man's head in with his prosthetic leg, the snap audible above the din of battle as Snotlout drew near and stopping him in his tracks. The smoke rose around them, the orange light of the fires turning everything red, the blood looking like puddles of black ichor as it reflected the fire and armour. The smell of human flesh and blood burning permeated the entire area, the haze of the fumes giving an other-worldly shimmer to the entire battle, as if the fates were all three looking on, making the threads of their tapestry evident even to the eyes of lowly humans. Hiccup was looking at him with eyes as black as night, only the faintest trace of green shining dragon-like around the rims.

But this was not like the dragons; his pupils were not benevolent when they were wide and open. He looked possessed, as though something had entered his flesh and taken over him. He moved differently, stood differently; naked as he was in battle, he hadn't an ounce of worry or fear in him, looking around calmly as if he was viewing the rising sun on a balmy dawn.

"May Glamr stay away," Snotlout whispered, feeling a tremor run down his spine. He didn't know whether it was the fever doing this to his cousin, or whether it even was his cousin at this point. But he had recognised his name, had looked up, and Snotlout was not about to take a chance.

He began trudging towards Hiccup again when a hail of arrows come down on them. Snotlout yelled and ducked, using a body of a dead Berserker to shield himself and throwing it off as quickly as he could, looking up frantically. He fully expected to find his cousin impaled and bleeding, but Hiccup had ignored the arrows completely, as if he'd known that he was just a few inches out of their range, to swiftly take a hatchet from the ground, pivot with more quickness than he'd ever seen and fling the weapon at a man who had been coming up behind him, never even batting an eyelash as his opponent shivered and choked before falling, weapon lodged in his throat between shoulder-plate and helmet.

Snotlout ran up, then, grabbing Hiccup by the shoulders.

"Hiccup! What the fuck are you doing here! You're not even wearing any armour — shit!" He grabbed for his cousin, but Hiccup had pushed him face down, and before he knew, it the slight man had first disarmed and then taken possession of the man's sword.

"This is not a sword," he growled, hefting it. The Berserker seemed to sense that he was not facing something quite real, quite human, and backed a step. "The Saracens my brothers have wrought iron since the advent of Midgard. The smiths of our tribes have brought hammer to anvil before the dwarves even tried it. And you bring me this! This abomination!" Hiccup growled, then, attracting many a warrior around them, both enemy and ally. "May Thor curse you and your lineage, and may they never again hold a sword in their hand that does not cut off their hand!" The sword went into the other man, hilt deep, with a sickening crunch that had Snotlout vomit into the grass. "Foul demon from the depths of Hel's realm" go back there and tell her that her metal has no place on Midgard!"

He turned with a snarl, and Snotlout got up again, flanking him and looking around frantically at all the Berserker warriors who had begun to advance around them. His hackles rose, both from the threat of the enemies, and from standing so close to this man who was Hiccup and yet at the same time didn't seem to be. Hiccup hissed at them like a snake, and it arrested their step as if he really were; Snotlout knew that he was not the only one, then, who had sensed something æ other-worldly about his cousin's current state.

One of them yelled and ran forward, and all the men surrounding them rushed towards them at once. What happened next was something Snotlout was never going to forget, for as long as he lived. Hiccup ignited Smoulder and went ahead to take on the near eight warrior almost on his own. He wore a snarl on his face Snotlout didn't recognise, but he ran calmly forward, beheading two men at once, turning on his metal heel, impaling another, and in the same motion of bringing his sword out stabbing a man with it behind him. He jumped to the side as another came with a spear; Smoulder bit right through the spear like butter, then he cut the men's legs off and never looked at him again as he collected the broken spear and jumped over him to run at a man holding an axe over Phlegma with a scream right out of a haugbui's mouth. He rammed the spear into the man's gut, making him double over, and then spun and separated the man's head from his neck with the strength of the rotation.

"Are you alright?" Hiccup asked, and Phlegma could only nod, trying to get to her feet. Hiccup whistled and a dragon landed, as if it was his very own and he'd trained it for years. The baffled rider took one look at Hiccup and gasped. "Take Phlegma to safety. She's not in a state to fight."

"Neither are you!" the woman cried as she tried to struggle out of Hiccup's grip. Snotlout felt more fear flood his gut like ice when she didn't manage, and Hiccup didn't even seem to notice her struggles.

"These horrifying creatures have come here, trying to kill my loved ones and take my home." Hiccup turned to the carnage around them, the same placid, cool look on his face. "And it's made me terribly, terribly angry. I will kill every last one of them with my bare hands if I have to."

"Get her out of here!" Snotlout said, ignoring Phlegma's protests and covering the dragon as it took off, realising that his cousin's focus had shifted again.

Snotlout could admit that his memories of the battle were a haze;

scattered at best. But he could also swear that he had covered Phlegma's escape for a few seconds. When he turned around, Hiccup was gone, racing down the hill silently, moving like a shadow. The Berserkers didn't see him coming, between the speed of his movement and the lack of the shining armour. He moved through the people around him as if he were a nÃ;r-fÃ¶l, skin pale beneath the blood covering him but no less deadly. His body moved like black water stained with blood, flames on his sword firing up randomly as it swung in an arc, Hiccup moving from one form to the next with a flawless, seamless sort of motion which usually happened only in practice.

Snotlout rushed to flank him, but there was little need. Hiccup stepped to the side as an axe blade came down and lunged, cutting the man's arm, and then following through with a pivot that took an eye out of another man with a throwing knife in his right hand while the left one, still holding Smoulder, cleaved the other man in two even as he held his bleeding stump in disbelief. The blinded man tried to stab his stomach, and Hiccup simply stepped back before punching him in the face with the dagger's hilt, sending him reeling. A step forward again and another man found the first man's axe embedded in his skull while another Berserker got his knee broken with a well placed kick of the prosthetic. Without missing a beat or ever even doubting his balance, he cut another Berserker's leg off and pushed him onto yet another, Snotlout ready with his hammer to kill them both. Three others came at them all together, and Hiccup nailed all three between the eyes with throw knives before they made two steps, and then proceeded to step over a corpse to retrieve a spear and launch it at an archer who was aiming for Wolftooth, catching him in the leg.

"Watch out!" Snotlout yelled as another hulking warrior came at Hiccup from behind. Snotlout dispatched another Berserker with a hammer-smashed skull and moved towards Hiccup, because he hadn't shown any indication of having heard his warning. Hiccup moved aside as if he had eyes at the back of his head and drove Smoulder upwards and backwards, the tip of the thin, empty blade emerging under the man's shoulder blade. He gave a coughing gargle â€“ obvious his lungs had been turned to mush, and Hiccup pushed him off, but the hulking beast took Smoulder down with him.

"Vile monster from the pits of Hel's rotted breast!" Hiccup roared at him, tugging at the hilt. The sword's empty middle had evidently caught something with the body in its hook-like structure â€“ probably a rib â€“ and the man moaned at ever tug. Not that Hiccup seemed to notice. His skin was almost invisible under a layer of fresh and dried blood mottled like earth, mixed with ash. Snotlout go close enough to realise Hiccup hadn't a scratch on him â€“ even his nails were intact, and his knuckles were unsplit. The way Hiccup was moving â€| Snotlout had seen it before, but he somehow couldn't place it. He almost felt scared to look too hard, because Hiccup had evidently been touched by the gods that day, and one did not question their gifts.

Finally, Hiccup lost his patience and kicked the man's head with his metal leg, diving his hand into the man's open chest to tug the blade free of whatever was keeping it there. The man wailed like a tortured animal, and Snotlout vomited again as he caught a glimpse of his still-beating heart amongst the carnage of his ribcage when Hiccup finally tugged Smoulder free. Snotlout brought the hammer down on his

head, and considered it the greatest act of mercy he'd ever bestowed. That man's ascent to Valhalla was all but secured.

Smoulder was lit again within seconds, emitting the putrid smell of burning flesh. Snotlout had to hold his stomach down when he realised the sword was burning off the remains of that man's lungs. Hiccup drove the knife into a gloating man's back from behind, gutting him in one swift motion and watching him twitch dispassionately for a second before he turned to look at Snotlout, who'd screamed.

There were spears jammed up two men, coming out the shoulder from beneath their Gleipnir tunic. One of them was Oddar the Oddhead, a good man with children, and another was Berk's best baker. Tears sprang to Snotlout's eyes as he realised he had a great deal of memories with Burp, who had loved to sneak the children treats even though it was bad for trade to give things for free, and made the best cream pies this side of the grey sea.

"Oddar â€“ shit, and the bakerâ€“!" he moaned, blinking the tears out of his eyes as the adrenaline transmuted his sense of displacement and loss into anger. Then he froze, realising that if he was feeling this, Hiccup was probablyâ€“

Snotlout turned to the left slowly, only to see a snarl unfurl on Hiccup's face that he had seen before. On a night fury's face, just before he angrily attacked anything that moved as he protected his beloved master. All of a sudden, Snotlout realised exactly how the gods had helped Hiccup that night, and realised where he'd seen the movements before. They had imbued him with the spirit of a night fury. The snarl on his face was ghastly, especially paired with the blood smeared skin and plastered hair glinting red and black.

Hiccup threw his head upwards like an alert dragon, shoulders straight and stiff, chest heaving. His black eyes scanned the whole battle scene, it seemed, and then he froze like a figure carved out of stone standing in the Great Hall. Hiccup's head roved as if following a moving object, his eyes tracing a line in the air in segue of nothing Snotlout could see, and he began walking towards a very definite destination.

A number of Berserkers approached them, but Hiccup stopped them in their tracks with a look like a wolf did a subordinate. They faltered and stepped back the second they met his eyes, warriors three times his size and probably twice as experienced. Snotlout followed him anyway, holding his hammer high in guard in case any of them decided to risk it; none of them did. The men who stopped stayed where they did, as if their feet had been sunk into the earth.

And then Snotlout saw Astrid being held down by two men and knew that things were going to become insane. Hiccup could go ballistic about Astrid while he was in his right mind â€“ his jaw could attest to that. But while he was in whatever state the gods had placed him in right now?

Hiccup took a deep breath into his chest, his head bending down into an ominous growl, chin nearly touching his chin, before he raised his head again, never blinking.

"Yes, yes I like you," Dagur said, laughing in an abandoned manner that was most definitely insane. He was glorying in the blood and

carnage and looking at Astrid in a manner that made Snotlout sick. "I want this one. I want this one later. I really, really like her!"

"Find an hourglass. In the shed over there," Hiccup told him, a calmness in his voice as he looked at Dagur with the unblinking gaze of a hungry wolf. Or dragon. "Take her when she's free. Stay where I can see you."

Then he moved.

"I don't quite agree," he simply said, and took both men's heads off with one swing. Blood jetted up into the air, making Snotlout's revolted stomach protest again, but he ignored it as best he could as he dashed forward, taking hold of Astrid before anything else could happen.

"Move, move back, it's about to get ugly!" he hissed. Dear gods, if Hiccup was ruthless and enraged before, it was going to be nothing compared to this. Astrid had been held down by two men as Dagur talked about his intention to rape her. Snotlout realised he had begun trembling at the mere thought of what his minute, quiet, violence-hating cousin was capable of doing when pushed.

Astrid was not making it easy, either, the blood from her detainers making her skin slick as she tried to move back towards Hiccup.

"What are you doing! We have to go help!" she screamed, and he finally managed to find purchase on her wrist guard, dragging her behind an upturned cart as he broke the door into the partially burned shed just behind them, ramaging through its content and praying to Freyr that whatever power the Aesir had granted Hiccup had also enabled him to know that an hourglass was in that shed.

He found one almost immediately. Snotlout did not feel ashamed when his trembling became even more pronounced as he tried to reassure Astrid, then held the thing up triumphantly, shaking it to make the stupid, stupid sand descend all into one half of it. With a quick look, he raced out, cursing as he felt Astrid follow, and by the time he was crouching in the cover of an overturned barrel, the sand was clear. He signalled Hiccup, who nodded subtly.

"You may want to look away," he told her with a swallow, his voice cracking badly as she tried not to tremble, fingers on the hour glass he obviously had to flip. He had an idea of what Hiccup had in mind — his father wasn't Stoick's second for nothing — but it just scared the living crap out of him. He heard Astrid's hissed denial abstractly, knowing even before she spoke that she would not go, almost grateful that she wouldn't. Whatever the gods had done to Hiccup, he was still in there, and yet at the same time had turned him into a creature of death that was so far from his cousin Snotlout could not reconcile the two things he was seeing wrapped in one bloodstained, unblemished body.

"Oh gods, he's covered in blood!" Astrid choked beside him, as if reading his mind. "He's not even wearing shoes!"

"None of it's his," he hissed out, trying to reassure her; it came out more like the feared mention of a drouogr.

"What?" she gasped.

"You are the new leader of the Berserkers," Hiccup said, ignoring all of Dagur's bluster and threats with an airy tone that sounded almost bored, almost like he was repeating dictated words.

Dagur laughed with gusto, with the thrill of the blood and fire around him. "I am!"

"Then I challenge you. You will duel with me. The winner will take all," he replied. "I am the heir of this tribe, and I invoke the right to challenge you - to the death."

Snotlout's suspicions proved real as he quickly switched the hour glass, marking the approximate amount of time with a smudge of blood.

"What's happening!" Astrid hissed. "Tell me he isn't doing what I think he is!"

"He's invoking the right of single-duel," Snotlout replied. "He kills Dagur, the battle's over and we win. He dies, all of us are done for." He shook his head. "He's not going to lose. There's something â€‘ something going on with Hiccup."

"What do you mean!" she asked fearfully. The whites of her eyes showed all around as they flitted from the scene with the two men to him and back again. Snotlout kept a sharp eye on the sand, trickling down more slowly than he had ever seen it.

"I think â€‘ I think the gods gave him the spirit of a dragon, Astrid," he replied, almost fearfully. "He doesn't move like a normal man. He sees things coming at him from the back, he ran out here wearing nothing but sleeping clothes and never got hit once, even by arrows." He looked at his cousin, who was looking at Dagur with a blank face while the other man gloated and attempted to goad him into attack, a hungry gleam in the Berserker's eyes which didn't even hold a candle to the bloodlust in Hiccup's. "I think he has night fury spirit in him, tonight."

"Oh, oh godsâ€‘" Astrid choked. "What's he even doing hereâ€‘"

"Snuck out of camp, walked here in the dark, got over the wall â€‘ Astrid, the gods led him here. There's just no other way!"

"You have accepted my challenge!" Hiccup suddenly bellowed, raising Smoulder, and Snotlout's eyes snapped to the hourglass he'd placed within Hiccup's view, the sand suddenly reaching the blood-mark and more. "You take my challenge as heir of Berk for your own as leader of this tribe of monstrous creatures from the depths of Niflheim! The time necessary has elapsed and the challenge is in place! The law states thus and may Forseti curse you!"

"He doesn't even speak like Hiccup," Snotlout moaned, almost wishing he could back away, but at once unable to abandon his cousin. Astrid's knuckles were white as she gripped the barrel, eyes glued to the fighters.

"I didn't accept any challenge!" Dagur growled, losing ground under Hiccup's savage blows even with two weapons in hand.

"You call yourself a chief!" Hiccup replied, though his growl was slurred and almost unintelligible. "When you don't even know the Viking law? How are you leading your tribe when you don't know the laws required to lead it? Are you Outcasts? Are you slut-sons from between the legs of Loki's consort, unfit to walk among other men of the allied tribes?" Hiccup disarmed him, snarling his axe within Smoulder's gap and flinging it away, sending it whirring in the air to embed itself into a flaming building. A number of Vikings ducked, both allied clan and Berserker troops halting to come around the fighting pair. Snotlout's heart began beating in his throat and he grabbed Astrid's hand, holding it tightly. She spared him a glance.

"If Hiccup loses, we're all dead, but he's not going to lose," he told her.

"You sound almost more afraid of him winning," she said, looking terrified as her eyes followed the two fighters. Hiccup was still moving like a creature from another world, a night fury without scales poured into human skin for a night. His eyes never blinked as he moved out of Dagur's sword's path. He almost looked like he was dancing, his steps measured and sure as Dagur's attacks failed to touch him. Dagur took a swipe at his head and Hiccup ducked with a good margin of time; Dagur went after his legs and Hiccup calmly hopped back and kicked out with his metal one, chipping the Berserker's blade; Dagur tried to stab at his stomach and Smoulder knocked the blow away like a practice master correcting a stance.

For his part, the mad Berserker seemed to be enjoying it. "Ahaaa!" he screamed with glee as Hiccup kept dancing out of his way, his unnatural black eyes open, never blinking, and never looking an inch away from Dagur, "I will take your life, and it will be worth a thousand songs, a million edda, and the generations to come will know my name, Dagur the Conqueror!"

And then, Hiccup lunged. Snotlout watched as with one single, unbroken movement, Hiccup sidestepped the falling blade, descended with the blow as if he were accommodating Dagur's stance, crouched at a nearly impossibly angle, and then straightening with all the strength of his legs to drive Smoulder up into Dagur's belly.

There was a hush broken only by the crackling flames, the noise of a hut collapsing in on itself punctuating the quiet as Hiccup's serene expression looked at his blade protruding out of his opponent's back.

"HICCUP!" Astrid screamed beside him, and Snotlout didn't even know why until Dagur, through the pain the movement must have caused, raised an arm and brought a dagger down, blood running down the corners of his mouth as he smiled when he plunged it, aiming for the heart. Hiccup moved slightly and it sunk into his arm to the hilt.

The plateau stood unmoving for a moment longer before Hiccup smiled. "The gods are on my side," he replied, his tone definitely dragon as the predatory gleam in his eyes made Snotlout choke on his own fear.

"I cannot feel a shit."

The rest of the hall beside them caved in on itself, flames rising in a flash of bright light, flaming ash floating around them as Hiccup grabbed Dagur by the shoulder and pushed him off his sword; flung him to the ground. The expression on Hiccup's face, so empty, would be something he was going to carry with him for the rest of his-

"Snotlout?"

He jumped terribly, looking around in fright for a second before he realised that he was safe, sitting on the grass outside Stoick's hall and he had been reliving the nightmare in his head again, for the umpteenth time since its end. The chief's house, far from the plaza up the hill, had survived the calamity.

The Berserker soldiers were being held hostages â€“ what was left of them. Of the two-hundred odd Berserkers who had landed on Berk, there were only around thirty left. Though the Allied Clans and Berk had certainly suffered losses, they had apparently been cut short the moment Hiccup had entered the fray.

Snotlout blinked at the girl who walked up and sat beside him, putting her red-haired head on his shoulder and curling close to his side. His mind was still trapped in that horror. He'd not known that something like that had been lurking inside his cousin's quiet, kind demeanour. And that time, all those months ago, when he'd committed his horrible act towards Astrid, he'd been very lucky that he'd only received a bruised jaw. Hiccup had gone out there, the spirit of his night fury battle-brother infused into his blood, and decimated sixty men single-handedly on the final tally, with a sword and throw knives, or with weapons he lifted off corpses and his opponents. He had not been wearing armour or protection, and had received nothing graver than a shallowly stabbed arm.

It had been both fantastic and terrifying to watch.

"Is it true that Hiccup shared Toothless' soul for the battle, because his dragon couldn't join him?" Lauga asked, sounding awed. Snotlout swallowed, terrified of the admiration in her voice not for reasons he usually would be. That had been like witnessing something that â€“ shouldn't. Awe was not the tone he would use.

"Yeah," he choked, nodding. Lauga sat closer to him, her warmth seeping into his side feeling comforting and real, and pulling him away from the world of flame and shadows inside his head. "Yes, he did. It was something I hope â€“ never to see again."

"Really?" Her head came off his arm and she looked at him deeply, considering his words and tilting his head, trusting his judgement and waiting for him to elaborate. Snotlout had been smitten with her for a while, but it had been nothing but a passing fancy before, because Astrid had always been his sole aim and target. Lauga's grey eyes above white freckled cheeks, framed with her flaming red hair, however, had become a fascination he didn't mind when he had made peace with Astrid's impossibility, and when he had noticed her falling into dangerous circles, he'd quickly intervened to make sure she stayed out of them. She'd even tried to protect what she had considered to be the interest of a friend, standing up to the heir of

the Boggies, of all people.

"Lauga, it was something I'm glad no one but the warriors saw," he admitted. "It was unnatural, as if he was unkillable and invincible."

"He went out without armour, right?" she replied, still considering his words as she looked at him attentively. "And remained unwounded." She sounded impressed, but then she stopped to think on it. "I can see how that is unnatural."

"It was," Snotlout said in a hushed whisper. "I could feel the gods' hands all over it, and I'm not even sure whether it was Thor or _Loki's _doing, either. We're lucky that Hiccup is so strong, or he may have been driven insane worse than a Berserker. He kept his mind together, knew who his allies and enemies were â€‘ but when the gods step in â€‘ it's not natural."

"Hmm," she replied. They were silent for a moment, watching the line of chained men in the plaza, Callous at the head of them, forced to stand for three days with only bread and water as punishment. "What a Snoggletog," she sighed. "I had a gift for you, you know? It burned down with my hut." She shrugged, her cheeks going red. "I was in the Hall all day, and my mother didn't pack it away."

"You're safe," he replied generously, though it didn't much feel like the usual flirtation as the truth of it sunk in. "That's gift enough."

He felt so gratified by the colour rising up her face, so different from the cold and indifferent responses he had always received from Astrid. And while he'd charmed a few of the more â€‘ open barmaids before, Lauga had never submitted to advances beyond a mortified blush and a skittish step away. Her blush, now, meant something different, and it bolstered his spirit in the face of what he'd just lived through.

"Say â€‘" he went on, looking up at the grey clouds that had dawned over Berk on this bleak, bloody Snoggletog. Almost everyone was in the great hall, living there until the halls could be hastily repaired or rebuilt before the great freeze set in. "How about, when all this calms down, you and I go for a walk?"

"Alone?" she asked, unsure, looking at him carefully.

"After I speak to my dad, perhaps. And yours." He shrugged, leaving it open. She would either take him up on the offer, or she wouldn't. Her keen grey eyes scrutinised his features as he spoke. "I need to take Hellion out there anyway. Hoark told me that nightmares needed a lot of exercise; you know, to tire them out enough to train."

The tiny dragon was curled up on his other side, mottled, rainbow hide warm against Snotlout's waist as he looked at the burned plaza with interest. Fireworm had brought her baby after the battle, taking her clean off Hoark's nightmare and plopping her in Snotlout's lap without preamble. Confused and dazed as he'd been, he hadn't disputed the sudden ownership, and now felt majorly disinclined to.

So now he had a nightmare again. And Fireworm still sidled up to him sometimes for a good scratching, when Stoick was unavailable.

"I won't mind that walk," Lauga finally decided, and Snotlout felt a small smile break a corner of his lips. "You'll speak to our dads first, though, right?"

"Promise," he replied, deciding that he would take a page out of his cousin's book in this too. Hopefully his father would approve. Lauga's family weren't too wealthy, but they weren't at the bottom either, and her work at the Hall during the Thing had made it very evident that she was a good homemaker.

And Snotlout really felt that he needed her by his side, especially now. Her presence was calming, a balm to the horrors he'd seen - he still saw every time he closed his eyelids. When she smiled, the day seemed brighter even though the sun was hidden, and he really liked the way she smiled at him often.

Both of them turned their heads to look when Stoick exited his hall, looking more haggard and tired than Snotlout have ever seen, even during the harrowing years of Hiccup's absence. Standing and pulling Lauga with him, he accosted him discretely.

"Sir, how is he?" he asked quietly.

"Fine. Astrid is with him â€“ she fell ill from her exposure the other day, and both of them need bed-rest. But Brunhilda says that're stubborn as angry mules." Stoick gave a huff of laughter, his eyes showing that his mind was far away as he looked at the grass at his feet. "They'll be ok."

"That's great," Snotlout sighed, tensions slithering down his shoulders and out of his abdomen. "Are you going to the Hall, sir? I will stand for Hiccup and Astrid. I won't let their place be vacant after all they did."

Stoick looked at him for a second, then clapped his back and nodded, moving towards the Hall. Lauga quietly let go of his arm and moved beside him. Snotlout was bone-tired and shaken, but Hiccup had proved to be more than a role-model, a good cousin and a good friend. As they passed the line of Berserkers chained to one another on the plaza, he glanced at some of them, and he saw in their eyes the same fear that he still felt himself.

Hiccup was their future chief, the first dragon rider, and he shared a soul with his night fury companion. He was protected by Asgard, chosen as a hero, and anyone who went up against him died a horrifying death. He was Hiccup the Negotiator â€“ and you had better wish he was in a mood to negotiate with you, because the gods help you if he wasn't. Snotlout had heard them all, the rumours circulating about his cousin's feat, as he sat there on the grass awaiting news, lost in the looping horror of the battle.

His cousin had become a one-man fire curtain, capable of reducing the Berserker men to shivers at the mention of his name. And that, for Berk, was the biggest boon of all. And while Hiccup recovered from the touch of the gods, Snotlout would stand in for him, and protect not just his cousin, but Berk's new legacy.

**Well then, this chapter was probably unexpected, and definitely fragmented. That is on purpose â€“ after I wrote it, I actually went back and added or removed things to make things even more messy and confusing. Hiccup is under the influence of the medicine he was given, and is thus experiencing a rather horrible trip. While I have not dabbled in drugs myself, I suppose this is what I imagine it would be like. Hiccup remembers strange, incomplete things, and his memory of the night is going to be sketchy at best.

>

Again, I did not pull punches. This fic is rated M mostly for the violence.

So the basic overview is that the Berserkers attack, Berk counter attack, Hiccup manages to escape the safe beach - but in the grips of a powerful hallucination that make his senses hyper aware and makes the armour of the Berserkers make them seem like creatures from Norse' underworld. As he has lived with Toothless for very long, he has assimilated some of his movements without realising, and this grace of movements is brought out by the drug he was given. With his inhibitions gone completely, he goes out there, kills a large number of people while only wearing trousers, challenges Dagur using Viking law and wins, ending the conflict. Many lives are saved and Snotlout is forever traumatised. And the Berserkers will be checking under their bed for Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the III in the far future.

24. Lack of Love

**The last chapter. Uploading this all at once was cruel and unusual punishment.

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A warning: There is some physical, amorous behaviour between our two lovers in the first scene.

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><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Chapter 22 - Lack of Love_

**It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.**

â€• _**Friedrich Nietzsche**_

Astrid took a deep breath as she felt herself wake. She didn't even know what woke her, aside from a strange series of 'popping' sounds. Her limbs were heavy from being so tired for so long, but the sheets were fresh and smelt of the lavender water her mother added to the linens. The surroundings were quiet and calm, the sheets and fur around her warm, and her body, though feeling heavy, also felt well-rested. There was a back-taste of honey in her mouth, too;

something her mother liked to add to sleeping medicines, so Astrid was sure she'd had a long, deep rest with one of her mother's brews.

She opened her eyes without reluctance, knowing she could fall asleep again at the drop of a hat if she wished it, but rather content to savour the early morning minutes of absolute comfort, stretching in that delicious way that was only this rewarding this time of day.

She was struck by the daylight right away. Her room - or rather, Hiccup's room - was the only one with a window that let sunlight in during the Winter, because it was fitted with the incredibly expensive 'glass' that only Stoick could afford to buy, the one time Trader Johann had managed to bring a large sheet of it to Berk intact. The glass was opaque and thick, and Astrid suspected that Johann had made an incredible profit from it, because it was not of a quality that deserved the price Stoick had paid for. But between the material's relative fragility and the long trip from the deep South where it was produced, they would probably never see another sheet like that unless they ordered it. Stoick had purchased it for its weight in gold, outfitting Hiccup's room during his absence in one of these many little ways that showed the man's mind was never far from his son, muttering out loud as he put it in place that now Hiccup would have more light to draw by, when he came back.

The irony. Astrid had taken over this room, and Hiccup had slept downstairs since his return. And while the Haddock hall had other windows, the wooden shutters were kept tight shut this time of year; no use wasting good firewood to the Winter.

Astrid yawned and stretched again, wondering idly if Hiccup had ever encountered glass in his travels, whether the chest of treasures that Stoick was keeping for him, hidden away somewhere, contained glass and other objects that to her seemed wondrous. Another yawn split her mouth, the tears it brought to her eyes waking her more completely as she became more aware of her skin, the soft linen of her sleeping clothes against the bed-warmth, the arm around her waist-

She froze, her senses struggling to shed any tiredness or drug to spring to high alert. She realised there was breath puffing on the back of her neck, and that the comfortable warmth at her back was another body, her own leeching the toastiness from it. Without trying to move too much, she looked down and instantly relaxed when she saw a familiar, freckled hand, long fingers lax in sleep.

Astrid wriggled slightly, her foggy brain trying to remember how she had managed to get her betrothed into bed with her. Trying to ignore the blush that rose at the thought of what else her foggy brain may be forgetting, she moved from under his relaxed grip, turning to lie on her back to look at him.

He was deeply asleep, and if she had to guess, there was that sleeping brew involved in his slumber through her jostling too. She blinked at him slowly, trying to remember why both of them drinking sleeping medicine made sense to her mind in a non-alarming way, but she let it drop in favour of a more pleasurable activity. Looking at him.

When he was awake he never stood still for more than a few moments at

a time. He was a ball of energy, like a new-born calf jiggling around, hopping from one thing to the next giddily. His eyes were shining with excitement about a new idea one minute, and off looking at the horizon the next, missing the sky.

A sudden thought stopped her short, the rest of her memories flooding back as her brain woke up and feeling like a hammer of Thor slamming into her skull.

He missed the sky. He missed the sky and he almost left, because his life here was stifling and tiresome.

But he'd also stayed, and they'd talked, and he loved her.

Astrid's hand was running up his chest gently before she could stop herself, eyes counting the freckles dusting under his fanned eyelashes as they used to do so often as children. She scooted closer, nosing at his clothes to take his smell in, feeling safe in being so outwardly affectionate when he was asleep, and because he was Hiccup. His smell was clean, lye soap a powerful overlay to the other smell - ink, wind, sea. Hiccup. Astrid closed her eyes again, feeling the comfort seep back in as her forehead rested against his shoulder, the rise and fall of his breath brushing her nose against the fabric of his sleeping shirt.

Hiccup loved her - Astrid. They'd spoken about Sepha, and it was all alright. They'd fought a hoard of Berkserkers off last night and Hiccup was alive and well, sleeping peacefully against her. Her own fever from the exposure was passed, if her comfortable, tired body said anything, even though she became aware of her finger's twinge; the frostbite still aching when she moved. Her finger would look frightful until the skin healed and the nail set in, but it was nothing to worry about.

Not when he thought she was the most beautiful woman - despite his travels - and not when he loved her. Her finger had almost cost her her life in battle, those two men disarming her more easily than they should have with her grip compromised with the pain. But he'd come through then too; although she was mad at him for rushing into battle like that, and worried sick about his condition â€“ she couldn't deny to herself that the effect seeing him fight had on her was completely different from the one it had had on Snotlout and everyone else.

Perhaps, it was because she knew the truth. Hiccup hadn't been touched by the gods or cursed, or drunk dragon blood or any of the other absurd things Stoick had reported everyone was saying. The Goethi had merely given him a dose of medicine that was too large for his slight body. It had worked - the infection was all but gone, a slight reddening around the sore being the only thing left. But it had done strange, mad things to his body, and one of the side effects, usually, was very crazy dreams. With the dose Goethi had given him, his dreams had transmuted into hallucinations. From what she had seen, Hiccup had managed to power himself through the grips of a very potent vision, still managing to distinguish between friend and foe and coming out of a successful battle with only a stab wound to the arm.

Her hand stopped as she cupped his shoulder, wondering how the wound was faring. Her thumb rubbed his skin through the thin linen and he

moved slightly, the corners of his mouth twitching as he rubbed his cheek against their shared pillow. His breath bathing her face made her smile, and she wondered when she'd turned into a sappy idiot.

And he was going to court her. Even if she went out and killed all the trees, there was no hope for her. The hollow of her chest was mush now, thanks to him; a soggy, sappy mess that was all his fault and that she really, really hope was not going away. She still wasn't sure if Stoick was right - she wasn't sure if she loved him. But she certainly knew that she felt for him like she felt for no one else.

And he loved her, her sappy, soggy mess-chest sang, and she smiled at nothing like a half-wit. That just made her want to get up right now to start sewing him those trousers. She was dying them green this time, like his eyes, and dressing him in a linen shirt so white it would shine. And make him a leather vest of the same green colour, so his eyes would pop and his hair would shine and he's look â€|

She bit her lip and chuckled at herself, knowing she was in for a world of teasing from all the women she knew - her mother and Ruff in the front lines - and not caring a whit. He thought he wasn't beautiful of all things. That because she'd not jumped his bones or done the demure thing and blushed and looked away, she wasn't interested.

Idiot. Truly. Then again, she'd done the same when he'd looked away to preserve her dignity, so maybe they were a pair of idiots. That was fine with her; they were well suited. She buried her nose further into his chest, savouring the smell and feel of him. She just hoped he wouldn't remember any of that. If his reactions to his battle at the Eastern Capital had meant anything, he would be appalled by his head-count. Sixty, a full five score. Even his father boasted no more than seventy five in a single battle. He would probably see it otherwise, because he was fundamentally a good, kind man, but she saw it for what it was. When push came to shove, he could pick up a weapon and do what was best for his people.

Passing an arm underneath his, she drew him closer, pressing his front to hers and her face to his neck. Unfortunately, she wasn't quite careful enough and jostled his stab wound, making him groan and stiffen. Astrid looked at him apologetically as his eyes blinked open, the groan still on his lips. He was probably not experiencing her comfortable wake-up, and she rubbed his elbow slowly to ease him into it. He groaned again, his face twisting before he blinked puffy eyes open.

"Wha â€|" he slurred, and Astrid worriedly checked him for temperature. It was thankfully nothing higher than bed-warm, and as he smacked his lips and shook his head, Astrid reached behind her to the small stool by the bed, rising to a sitting position to pour some water from a jug. He kept blinking up at her, evidently still rather more asleep than awake, and she caressed his face before she cupped his cheek and raised it to the glass. He sipped once before he pushed himself up, grumbling with a wince as the movement pulled the stitches on his arm.

"Careful," she whispered, giving him the wooden cup and sitting up beside him as he chugged it down.

"Frigga, my head is all foggy," he moaned. "The light feels like hammers. Did Toothless hit me harder than he wanted to with his tail or something?"

"That's happened before?" she asked, amusement escaping in her tone.

"Once," he mumbled, hiding his face in his hand as he put the cup down and went on his back again. "He was so sorry about it, I kept finding piles of raw fish at my feet every morning - all of them regurgitated. It took a while to convince him that I wasn't mad, and that I still trusted him."

"Sounds like Toothless," she chuckled, helping him down.

"Where's he? And gods, what on earth happened? The last thing I remember, we were next to your shrine andâ€|"

Astrid sidled up to him as he groaned again, his noises of discomfort going straight to her heart. Resting on her elbow, she leaned into his side and carded her hand through his hair until his stiff posture relaxed, and the sounds he made became appreciative keens.

"Toothless is fine. He's with the eggs," she whispered, becoming mesmerised herself with the movement of his chest as his breathing calmed and his eyebrows eased away from one another. "Does your head hurt that much?"

"Yeah," he said, voice light. "But it's better now that you're doing this. Please don't stop."

She smiled. "I don't plan to," she replied, her voice lower as she leaned into him even more. She was luckily on his left side, so his injured arm could remain unjostled, while his left arm quickly squirmed its way out from beneath her weight and curled around the back of her waist. She pushed more of her weight against his front, stretching to reach the back of his head.

"That's it," he said with a wince. "That's where it's hurting most."

"Here?" she said, squirming more to reach further back. The moment her fingers began massaging the very back of his head he went boneless, closing his eyes in bliss with a sigh.

"I don't know why it hurts so much," he muttered with a bit of a pout. Astrid bit her lip as his puckered; she had never been very good at resisting his pouts.

"it's probably another side-effect of the medicine," she sighed, making a mental note to tell Goethi about it later.

"Another side effect?" he asked, catching onto her lapse even when half asleep. At least she managed to stifle an annoyed groan of her own.

"Well, you did sneak out of the safe beach and come into the village, Smoulder in hand. Cattongue came out to play a bit last night," she

said wryly, still slightly annoyed at him for the danger he put himself through despite the better ending they'd had for it.

"He did- I mean, I did?" he asked, incredulous as his eyes popped open to look at her. Astrid nodded. Stoick and her had agreed to tell him at least part of the truth, and the members of the Haddock family had sworn the healers to secrecy about his altered state, which hadn't taken much convincing.

"Yup," she replied, getting comfortable on his chest and smiling down at him as she kept up her massage on his head. "You worried Toothless half to death, and Åttta was crying when we brought you back to the beach." She poked him in the ribs and he squirmed. "And you were supposed to tend to Woodnut after you got better. She's your goddaughter, Mister Warrior."

Hiccup winced. "Sorry. Åttta was very upset?"

"Extremely," she sighed, pausing her gentle massaging and waited until he opened his eyes to look at her. "Look, you know that Åttta is my goddaughter, right?" He nodded up at her, letting his head drop back when she bit her lip and lingered a moment before continuing. She almost stopped, arguing with herself that he was tiredâ€| but they'd made a promise to always talk, so they wouldn't fight. And this was important. "Well, she's downstairs in the barn right now. She's with the eggs, and Toothless and his mate have let her sleep with them but â€| she's taken over your downstairs bed."

"She has?" he blinked. He looked around. "Oh right, I'm up here. But what â€|" he looked at her more sharply, his eyes trying to blink the fatigue away. "What's wrong, Asta?" he asked kindly. "You're trying to tell me something. Did something happen to Åttta's parents?"

"My brother died a while ago. At sea?" she reminded. His eyes widened and he nodded.

"Right, sorry," he muttered, his hands rising to caress her arms sweetly.

"Her mother got sick, probably the same thing Åttta had earlier this Winter, but â€| she didn't treat it. And with the Thing and all the things happening â€| when we noticed, it was too late." She sighed, guilt and discontent rising to her throat as she rested her head against his chest. "Some of the others even got sick, but mum has it under control. But her mum â€| she died before the attack even happened, so now, Åttta â€|"

"She's an orphan," he replied unhappily. She nodded against his chest. "Well, that's not a problem. I'll adopt her. I've been â€| erm â€| I'm guilty of having taken up much of that little girl's time."

Astrid's head shot up, looking at him incredulously. "Hiccup, you can't adopt her," she said, aghast.

"What, why?" His features twisted into something sad, and Astrid hurried on to dispel it.

"I- you're- You're going to be chief!" she said, trying to get the words out quickly. "She'll be your eldest child if you adopt her, and

she'd be your heir and she can't be!"

Hiccup blinked at her for a moment. "Why?" he asked, honestly confused. Astrid began to wonder if that medicine had addled his brain.

"Because she doesn't have Haddock blood, ninny," she replied with a sigh, and started up the massaging again, as he seemed too tired to talk and make sense right now, anyway.

"Oh, right â€œ!" he said, nuzzling into her hand. He grabbed it, bringing it to the front and kissing her wrist while he looked at the ceiling thoughtfully. And a good thing he didn't look at her, too, because his lips on her wrist had lit her entire arm on fire, a line straight to her breasts. "I still don't see a problem."

"Oh forâ€œ!" she sighed, pretending to be exasperated as she desperately hid her cheeks.

"No, hear me out," he said, and his voice vibrated against her ear, pressed tight to her chest. The usual nasal quality was gone at this angle, and it was warm and deep. She pressed more tightly against him, and he took it as a cue. "When I was gone, you were going to be the heir. And any heir is going to have Hofferson blood in there anyway." So much for bringing colour off her cheeks. One of her legs was straight down against his, languorously stretched against the outside of his left leg. Her right one had curled against him when she'd turned, and Astrid hadn't realised how intimately they were entwined. Now with the mention of heirs â€œ!

"True," she choked out, rubbing her cheek against his tunic. His fingers began digging into her back gently, reducing her to a boneless heap as battle-sore muscles sang under his firm, gentle touch.

"So she can be our heir. Have you asked dad about it?"

"Not about adopting. He said he didn't mind her living here, because the Hofferson hall is mostly full, and all the other sisters-in-law have children of their own â€œ! we never spoke of adoption. Never really thought of it; I mean, Ætta's mine, now, sure, but she doesn't have to be yours â€œ!"

"Don't you know?" Hiccup said, puffing his chest out. She rose to look at him, and then she snorted at the silly expression on his face. "Ætta is going to marry me when we grow up."

"Which for you, is never, so I'm safe from husband stealing" she laughed. He looked highly offended, and so biting her lips mischievously, the hands that had been resting placidly at his waist dug in. The indignant squeak he made was so amusing she burst out laughing, dancing against his ribs and raising the clothes to gain better access to his ticklish spots.

"I'm an injured, one-legged man!" he gasped, red in the face with tears of laughter running down into his hair. "Have mercy!"

"Surrender!" she crowed. He shook his head breathlessly, his laughter still ripping out of his throat - it was a lovely laugh, so full of

life and energy as he squirmed and wriggled under her. His movement were restricted as she brought her knee to clamp his right wrist against his hip, keeping that hand in place, but his other came around to her waist, and she was soon trying to dance out of his own attack.

"Aha!" he said, voice hoarse from laughing so hard. "A secret weapon! I didn't know you were ticklish here too!" His fingers danced on the back of her thighs and she squirmed, trying not to giggle too hard.

"Don't you dare, Hiccup Haddock!" she whispered in pseudo-menace that only managed to sound breathless.

"You can't stop me," was his impish reply, the smirk on his face lopsided and adorable.

"Well, if that's the way you want it, Iâ€"

She froze above him, mirth falling off her face as she realised that with all their wiggling, her sleeping dress had risen to a knotted lump around her waist, and Hiccup had only been wearing his shirt. Her womanhood was pressed up against him, and if his wide eyes meant anything, he'd suddenly noticed, too. Their rapid breath from the tickling changed to something heavier as they looked at one another, neither willing to move away. Then Astrid gave in, dropping her head to kiss him.

The kisses and touches escalated faster than usual. Whether it was because there weren't any secrets between them anymore, because they'd already been touching one another, or because they were naked against each another, Astrid didn't know. All she did know was that the only important part of her world became where his skin touched hers, how his left hand pressed her sweetly against his chest, and how kissing him like that was all she ever wanted to do with herself. Her hand rose to caress his face as she kissed down his jaw, taking swipes of his taste back into her mouth with her tongue as his moans made her shiver. His left hand massaged her back in wide circles, moving downwards, and when it landed on her naked thigh her breath caught. She could feel his manhood swelling against her, his right hand escaping from under her knee and rising to pull the collar of her night robe aside. Even as his left hand kept rising up her thigh, which went stiff and taut, every slow inch he rose finding anticipatory skin and leaving a fire trail behind, the pads of his fingers ran along her shoulders, and she had to stop kissing his neck to pant against his ear.

"So many freckles," he whispered, and she found herself moaning at the sound of his voice, so much deeper than usual, and touching her all over her skin at once. "I want to taste them all."

She shuddered, the image of his mouth on her skin suddenly turning her desire up a notch. Yes, she wanted his mouth on her skin. She wanted his mouth everywhere - Freya, what a thought! She let out another moan in his ear, and he groaned in response, his left hand snapping forward to cup her rear and squeeze.

She gasped when it pressed her against his growing, hard length, so hot against her folds she forgot how to breathe for a moment. Her body acted of its own accord as her hips began rocking against him,

and then a jolt of pleasure ran all over her skin, her nails digging into his shoulders as his manhood pressed against her front.

His mouth left a fire-trail of open mouthed kisses against her shoulder and neck. His hips began rocking in time with hers and the pleasure increased exponentially, her skin unbearably hot, all the sensations meeting at her centre and being stoked further every time his manhood stroked against her.

"Astrid, godsâ€|" he moaned against her ear, mouthing her lobe. The twin feelings of him calling her name sounding like that and his tongue and teeth on her ear were almost too much, her hips gyrating more quickly against him. His hand clamped down on her clenching butt cheek, helping her to establish a rhythm against him that his hips mirrored.

"It's never felt this good," he confessed against her, his tone that of a plea even when his words weren't begging. "Asta- Asta, I love youâ€|"

Her desire flared up, her skin feeling as if it was boiling off into vapour as she kissed and bit any skin of his that came under her mouth. Her heart beat so loudly in her ears she could hear nothing above it but his moans. All of her body was burning, her breasts prickling and sensitive, highly aware of his warmth through the cloth against her hardened nipples. His member was hard and hot against her, the rest of his body solidly thin, wiry and Hiccup. The thought that his manhood was what was pleasuring her drove her wild, his hands clamping down on her skin were the most welcome of restraints, and the moans he made, saying he loved her, saying it was good for him too â€| taking pleasure from this.

Gods, he was taking pleasure from this. She was giving him pleasure. They were sharing pleasure, for the first time.

The moment the thought registered in her mind, she felt her body go taut, her head thrown back as her heavy, needy breasts rubbed against his front and all her body drowned in a sea of clamping, pulsing pleasure.

"Hiccup!" she moaned, long and loud, and she didn't recognise the wonton, desirous tone that escaped her mouth, but it sounded right. His hand clamped down on her harder as he groaned a moment later, hot liquid jettisoning against her belly. She only realised as she calmed down that one of his fingers had entered her centre, and it gave another spasm of pleasure as she felt him remove it, a low, quieter moan escaping as she shuddered several times in a row.

"Asta," he whispered, dropping languorous kisses against her neck as they both tried to regain their breaths. Astrid opened her eyes, noticing that she had wrapped herself around him as she'd been recently thinking about doing very frequently, her body still shuddering when he moved beneath her, his softening member brushing against her. His neck was right in front of her, so she kissed it, her body finally going limp as she hid her face against the curve of his shoulder, which fit her cheek so perfectly.

"Wow," she breathed before she could stop herself. His hands never stopped running up and down her back, ever so gently.

"Was that the first time you â€|" he asked, quietly, his lips dropping small kisses on her hair that made her smile, so she kissed his clothed shoulder, careful to avoid the bandaging - which was spotted with blood.

"I'm a terrible nurse," she sighed.

"Not true," he replied, and there was a smile in his voice. "I'll bet no other patients get as good a treatment as that." Correction; there was a smirk in his voice. She slapped his chest, feeling lethargic, but also relaxed in an all new way, like she'd gone for a long run after some delicious stretching.

Delicious. That was a good word for him. She could still taste his sweat in her mouth, and it certainly wasn't a bad taste. Then she remembered that he'd asked her a question, her brain suddenly sluggish as she tried to process it before it fled. Her cheeks went red again as she realised what he'd asked - she didn't think it was possible for her to blush now. She looked down at him tiredly, blinking as he gave her a shy smile that hit her somewhere in her heart-area; wherever it was meant to be in that mushy place between her ribs. Taking courage from the fact that he was blushing too, she smiled at him, feeling stupidly shy about admitting this to him when they'd spoken of other things worse.

"That was my first with you in the room," she said, biting her lip. He blinked before his eyes went wide, and even more colour rose to his cheeks.

"Oh â€|" he breathed.

"Told you that you weren't the only one with â€| thoughts," she said, finding his chin very fascinating. And his mouth above it was honestly nice to look at. And â€| he had a scar right under his lip? Since when? Well, she had to say hello, so she kissed it. And then his mouth was right there, and she kissed it too.

"Mmm-mm!" he said against her, and a laugh burst out of their joined lips, making her move back just enough to look at him cheekily. He was giving her a dazed look like she had clocked him.

"Um, yes, you â€| mentioned itâ€|" he scratched his cheek and then reeled back when he left a shiny smudge. That was â€| that was her. Right there on his fingers. She wasn't sure whether she should start feeling hot and bothered again, or utterly mortified that it had somehow ended on his face. Both of them looked at each other, suddenly cheeks on fire, and she pushed away slightly, before she licked it off, when a slimy, sticky sensation on her abdomen brought her back to earth in a snap.

"Oh ew," she said, plucking gingerly at her night dress as it stuck to her skin with â€| him. "I'm so glad I do my own laundry. I can't imagine what my mother would say - oh Freya, remind me to wash this separately!" She looked at him urgently to find him giving her a chagrined, red-cheeked look as he rolled slightly onto his left shoulder when she sat up, coming up after her.

"Sorry! I'm so, so sorry, I didn't realise- I mean, I knew it went somewhere, and I should have realised and pushed you off, but it was too good and I wasn't thinking-"

"Really," she said smugly. He choked on air and gave her one more frantic look before he realised what he'd said and winced, rubbing a flaming cheek. She snorted at him, feeling simultaneously sheepish and so very full of herself, and she pulled the night dress over her head, using it to wipe the remainder of the white, creamy substance from her chest and lower abdomen. Hiccup made a wailing sort of choke and she found him hiding his eyes in his hands.

"What, it's your own *â€¢* stuff!" she said, crossing her arms.

"You're naked!" he squeaked. She bit her lip, looking down at herself - well, of course she was. She poked his shoulder. When he didn't respond, she poked it again.

"I'm going to be your wife, idiot," she said, rolling her eyes. "Go on, look. It's not like there's anything to hide after what we did!"

"We didn't do anything," he protested, frowning at her for a second before hiding his eyes again. She was so utterly tickled when his eyes went the long way south before he'd cupped them again.

"You call that nothing?" she huffed, prodding him strongly again. He rubbed his arm, looking at her with a pout, and she smiled cheekily. "Take that pout off your mouth unless you want me to kiss it off." The choking hiss he made was *_very_* rewarding.

"Shut up," he muttered, looking over her shoulder with determination. That just made her want to taunt him more.

"I won't until you say it was something." She draped her arms over his shoulder, using his erect position to stretch her back muscles and making happy noises that sent the colour flooding further in his cheeks. "I think you just called it 'too good'..." A kiss to his neck was all it took before he cracked and gently pushed her head back so he could look at her.

"I'm going to have another *â€¢* problem if I *_look_*," he said unhappily. She just felt smug. Her success in making him feel so good was making her blood pump faster, and she had to admit, she really wanted to hear him make those noises again. And the way he said her *_name_* *â€¢*

"We can 'deal with it'," she replied, trying to sound as alluring as possible. Could she be alluring? She didn't know - she was just a warrior. Give her a weapon and she knew what to do with it. But she was lost when it came to being *â€¢* seductive. Tempting. Still, Hiccup seemed not to be having any complaints, and he had taken pleasure from their little *â€¢* whatever it had been. Tryst? She really wanted to call it a tryst. It made them sound like lovers.

Hiccup, meanwhile, was too busy trying to breathe. Taking advantage of that distraction, she scooted forward, enjoying the way his body went even more tense when he was pressed up against her. His jaw was stubbly, so she kissed it and it was a major victory when he shivered.

"Happy Snoggletog," she whispered, kissing him again.

"It's Snoggletog?" he said, his voice breaking in a way that made her giggle. He tried to give her an offended look, but she only laughed more.

"Oh yes, and I like my present. But I want another one," she teased; a wide-eyed look and very red face. Another point to Astrid.

"Well, I â€œ!" he began sheepishly, before a high voice and small pattering feet stopped him short.

"Aunty! Uncle!" Her footsteps thumped on the wooden steps leading to their room, and they quickly scrambled with the fur, covering all the exposed bits before Åttta opened the door, pink-cheeked and panting happily. "Happy Snoggletog!"

"Happy Snoggletog, little one," Hiccup replied, his voice switching to something soft right away even as he pressed Astrid against him to hide the fact that she was completely naked. She could have told him that Åttta was completely used to seeing naked people too - that was just the way it was with crowded halls - but she didn't want to break his sheltered little heart. Especially not when it may mean that them two could have a private room to themselves, and maybe wean Åttta out of the habit of barging inâ€œ!

â€œ and climbing into the bed. Astrid sighed, rather disappointed, and Hiccup gave her a look that mirrored the feeling, but his arm was already open for the little girl to crawl into, and it gave her a different sort of thrill.

"It's the best Snoggletog ever!" she chirped, oblivious to the silent communication going on around her. "And my present is perfect!"

"It is?" Astrid asked in confusion. She hadn't given the child anything - and now that she thought about it, it was slightly unfair for poor little Åttta, but things had been so busy and horribleâ€œ!

"A bed all to myself! Without cousin Olga kicking me, or cousin Garble snoring in my ear, and all of Cousin Hackleback's farting-

"Åttta!" Astrid reprimanded, slightly embarrassed on her family's behalf. Hiccup only looked confused.

"You didn't have a bed to yourself?" he asked.

"No," Åttta answered with big, tragic eyes. "It was terrible. Cousin Hackleback's farts smelt like cabbages, and his feet stank of bad cheese."

Astrid snorted, but still prodded Åttta's shoulder. "be nice to your cousins."

"I am, nice," she insisted smartly. "They're not nice to me! Garble used to pinch me when I said he snored!"

"But she didn't have her own bed?" Hiccup asked again. Astrid rolled her eyes.

"Son of the chief, remember?" she teased. "We don't all have your perks. I had a bed to myself at first because I was a girl, but then the little cousins started coming, and we all shared. It was warmer that way anyway."

"I have Hiss, he keeps me warm!" Åttta said, puffing her chest out. Then she grabbed a handful of the fur Astrid was hugging to her front and tugged. "Aunty Astrid, is it true that I'm going to live here now? Grandpa Stoick says so."

"Grandpa- Åttta! Who told you to call him that!" Astrid asked, mortified. Åttta cringed, leaning into Hiccup and looking at them both in askance.

"He said?" she replied. "Did I do something wrong? Was he making fun of me?"

"No, no, you're fine," Hiccup said quickly, giving her a hug. He gave Astrid a cheeky grin of his own. "I think he's practicing," he whispered, and Astrid felt her face flush.

"Ah, um, alright, Åttta, if he says so," Astrid said, reigning herself in and slapping Hiccup gently on his good shoulder. "But you have to be respectful, you hear? He's our chief."

"Ok!" Åttta complied, her jovial mood back as quickly as it had gone. "Oh, Grandpa Stoick sent me up to tell you that there was an immigacy."

"A â€| what?" Hiccup asked.

"An immigacy," she repeated. "I think it means that someone was naughty, because Grandpa Stoick had this look. And he says he was sorry he was going to wake you up, but you were up! I'm going down to tell him he doesn't need to be sorry! He's told me he'll take me on a ride on Fireworm for Snoggletog!"

The little girl tumbled off the bed, cantering down the stairs again - then she stopped half way and climbed back up, "But right now he told me to stay with the Toothless and his wife, because they're going to have babies, and I'm a big girl and I can protect them. Hiss is helping me!" And then she was off again, noisily clattering down the stairs and pattering across the floor.

"Immigacy?" Hiccup echoed in amusement.

"I think she meant â€| emergency?" Astrid replied. Hiccup's head fell forward onto her shoulder.

"What, now?" he grumbled. "We just fought off an army! Can't we have Snoggletog in peace?"

"Maybe it's nothing big? Maybe we just ran out of meadâ€|" Astrid said hopefully.

"Oh, whatever, let's goâ€|" Hiccup sighed. Astrid prodded his chest, hard. "Ow! What?"

"You're not going anywhere," she said sternly. "You have a sore the

size of my thumb, and you are not getting on that leg."

"What? Oh, come on," he pleaded, his hands closing around her arms and keeping her put. Astrid didn't struggle too hard, rather liking the feel of his palm against her naked arms. "You're not leaving me here on my own, right? I'll die of boredom!"

"You could always think of me," she joked. His answering blush made her laugh.

"Then I'd need new sheets, new furs, and new clothes," he answered. She blinked at him, and then he was kissing her gently, his lips moving from her mouth, down her jaw, to nibble at her ear. "Come on, I won't move around too much," he whispered. "Maybe one of the dragons will give me a lift. I'm sure Toothless can take a break to come with me to the Great Hall!"

"Cheat," she replied, slapping his chest, and he just laughed, knowing he'd won. "Fine; but don't get used to this."

"I'm sure I will," he blustered with a grin. She grin right back.

"It works both ways, betrothed." Her hand crawled down his chest purposefully.

"You agreed!" he protested, pouting and plucking her wrist away.

"Mm, that pout," she replied, looking at his lips pointedly. She felt a little self-conscious about admitting her weakness for it, but his startled expressions was worth it. "I'm helping you down the stairs, no complaining. And you're not standing on it, you hear?"

"Anything you want," he promptly replied smugly.

"I'll remember that tonight." She stood, enjoying his blush at her words and her state of undress, walking across the room to quickly get into her clothes after she wiped herself down with a rag and some water.

She made short work of her clothes, though it took longer than strictly necessary to wash him down and get him into his clothes, enjoying the small touches and the kisses she managed to steal. The stairs were a little bit complicated, and they almost toppled headlong down twice. Astrid had refused to let him buckle his leg on, and left him sitting in the main room of the hall whining like an old maid while she slipped into the barn.

Áttta was sitting right between the two night furies, looking cosy with an arm around each egg, telling them a story about, apparently, Uncle Hiccup fighting against an ugly troll and winning. Astrid moved over to the farther stalls, getting a snout-to-the-face as soon as Stormfly smelt her coming. Her heart gave a jolt when she remembered Adderbite; the sweet old nadder who had comforted her while Stormfly was gone had been one of the victims of the fight. Amidst the happiness, the pall of death and the awaiting funeral ships being built hung in the background, a stark reminder if one cared to look over one's shoulder. Sensing her mood, Stormfly nudged her head in farther, nearly taking her off her feet. Her smile returned; no

thinking of that, now. Maybe this emergency was nothing more than needing a good dragon to fell a few more trees.

"Hey girl," she laughed, scratching her in her favourite spot. "How are you and your babies this morning?" Said little nadders were asleep, curled up in the hay around her stall, feet in the air and kicking. Their stubby little spikes had grown slightly, but they were still adorably chubby. Clover raised his head from Stormfly's rump, giving Astrid a greeting rumble.

"Hello to you too," she replied fondly. "Will either of you be ok with taking Hiccup and I to the hall? He can't walk."

Toothless made an indignant noise from the next stall, but Astrid gave him a look. "You have eggs. Hiccup doesn't like riding another dragon either, if it makes you feel better. And he can't wear that foot of his, so you two can't fly." Toothless looked stubborn. "He'll take you on an extra long flight as soon as he's better." The dragon chuffed, annoyed and grumpy, and dropped his head flat on the stone, radiating indignance. The female night fury gave him a lick and laid her head on his, purring and flicking his ears. "He's riding pillion with me, I promise," Astrid tried to console. Clover bumped her shoulder, obviously volunteering for the task, and Astrid cast one last apologetic look towards the sulking night fury before leading the nadder outside.

She helped Hiccup out, hopping on his one good foot.

"You're in trouble with your other girlfriend," she teased. Hiccup looked pained.

"Let me guess? He was jealous as Hel?" Astrid nodded happily, and he groaned in mock agony.

"It's going to take piles and piles of fish for him to even look at me. Even- even if it's all salmon and tarbot!" he grumbled, getting onto Clover carefully and holding onto Astrid tight as they flew the short distance to the Hall.

"Well, better bring out the fishing gear then?" she chuckled as they pushed the Great Hall doors open.

"This can't be tolerated!" someone yelled. "Just because she's an heir, she can't go around doing all she pleases with the heroes of Berk! And the chickens!"

Astrid paused, Hiccup blinking as he stood beside her, arm slung over her shoulder. The person talking was none other than Gerda Thorston, red in the face and furious.

"My son is out there, with that- that haridan doing Thor knows what to him!"

"Oi!" Bertha replied, several of the Bog women stepping forward. "If your son is such a hero, why didn't he just fight her off like a real warrior? Didn't look like he was fighting too hard to me! The truth is, your son was as willing to go along with it as any other guy with any sense in him!"

"Is this sounding all â€œ gender-bent to you?" Hiccup's amused voice

came to her ear. Astrid gave him a look. "I mean, it's usually the pretty damsels who get taken advantage of and ravagedâ€|"

"Unless they're Tuffnut, it would seem," Astrid replied. Hiccup sighed.

"Sleipnir's shit," he grumbled. "This is all my fault. I have the solution for it, but with everything else that's been happeningâ€|"

"Well, will that solution still work now?" Astrid asked as they began limping towards the Hall table.

"I hope so," he hissed back, clearing his throat. The room fell utterly silent when everyone turned to look at him. "What's going on?" he whispered in alarm.

"You just made a big impression at the battle," Astrid replied hurriedly. "Use it to our advantage!"

"Excuse me," he said, and Astrid helped him stand straighter so he could jut his chest out. He was definitely getting that nice white tunic, but she had to say he looked good in his leathers, too. "I would like to join the discussion."

"Of course!" someone squeaked, and several people ran up to offer a hand, though Hiccup thanked them and made his way forward with Astrid. Several more stools and chairs were offered than necessary when he reached his place beside his father. Someone offered an entire bench.

The room was embarrassingly quiet as Hiccup sat - well, embarrassing for him. Astrid found it a power-drive to watch them all shake in their boots every time he looked their way, especially the remaining UglyThugs - and everyone looked at him expectantly. Hiccup looked supremely uncomfortable, so he turned to his dad.

"Sorry we're late, getting here wasn't a walk on the beach... You mind getting me up to speed?" He rolled his shoulders.

"Well, son, it would seem that unbeknownst to everyone here," Stoick waved a hand at the Hall, but nailed his son with a look that said 'I know you know something', "your friend Tuffnut had an arrangement going with your also-friend Cami. And this morning, when the Thorston family tried to announce he was going to be engaged, she was understandably upset."

"Oh boy," he muttered. Hiccup looked around the hall, and Astrid watched him discreetly taking a quick head-count. Which was understandable, as Cami was more than capable of going on a rampage. "Sooo, they announced the â€| umâ€|"

"Tuffnut was instrumental to discovering who the spy was, so he's hot-shit right now, and the real haridan of the situation decided it was time to take advantage of it," Ruffnut drawled, standing next to Fishlegs in the crowd with Woodnut blowing bubbles in her arms.

"How dare you-"

"Oh shut up," Ruff replied to her mother with a glare that could melt

paint. "I'm not a Thorston anymore."

"So what exactly happened?" Hiccup asked before it could escalate into a screaming insult match.

"My girlie decided enough was enough," Gobber shrugged. "Grabbed the lad, hogtied him to her dragon, declared he was her husband and ran off with him."

Hiccup turned to blink at Astrid.

"Sounds like Cami stole her own husband," she replied airily, trying to keep the smile off her face.

"Did her mother proud," Bertha said with a proud nod.

"But my son's honour! And the chickens!"

"Can be easily fixed, actually," Hiccup interjected. He looked at Fishlegs, and Astrid caught his nod. "Maybe we should find them first, though?" His father gave a brief, amused nod. "I'd like to make it clear though that neither one of them is culpable in this. There's no need to have injured parties as long as we keep everyone above board."

"No injured party?" Gerda huffed again, though Astrid noticed it was much more circumspectly than before, her eyes only flitting to Hiccup and never really sticking. "What about the family honour? And his promised!"

"Let's- let's take things one step at a time, shall we?" he said, trying to be appeasing. The moment his hand came up in a calming gesture, the room subsided into silence again. Hiccup looked alarmed and puzzled.

"Then it's settled! Break up into teams and find them. Bring them back unharmed," Stoick said, taking advantage of the pause. "When you do, only bring them back to the Village - the council will decide what to do as a whole after my son says his piece. Aye?"

The positive chorus rose, and people got up and moved towards the door, their respective chiefs organising search parties and teaming up with Hooligans who knew the territory well.

"So son, are you feeling up for it?" Stoick asked, turning his big bulk to look at his son consideringly.

"Maybe it would be better if you asked my jailor," he commenting, poking a thumb towards her, and Astrid promptly punched him on the thigh. "Ow! is that a no?"

Both men looked at her, and she had to say, one set of keen green eyes was enough work resisting.

"Fine," she huffed. "But you're coming with me on Clover. I'm taking point this time." She folded her arms. "You ok with that?"

"We're in good hands," he replied with a nod, and her chest swelled despite herself at his opinion. Stoick slapped her on the back.

"Agreed. Now get out there you two - and I want this issue resolved before this evening. I want at least one quiet Snoggletog night. You hear?"

"Hear and agree," Astrid sang. Then she snuck her mouth against Hiccup's ear. "Though 'quiet' may not be what I have in mind for tonight!"

It was another victory when he blushed scarlet, forgot he didn't have his foot on and stood, nearly face-planting on the Hall table.

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Tuffnut's day hadn't started that badly, all told. He'd been sleeping in his sisters' hall, and Woodnut was blowing bubbles like a pro, doing that adorable little cackle when he tickled her feet. She had a mean right hook, too, he discovered, much to his sister's amusement as the little baby had left a good sized bruise on his lower jaw. Tufnut was quite proud of it himself. Damn his little niece had good blood in her. He hadn't thought Fishlegs would be a good candidate for a husband at first, but boy was he eating his own words.

His stupid sister was feeling under the weather, too; something about a stomach complaint that seemed to recur often enough to need medicine. The Goethi and Mother Hofferson were so busy with all the wounded from the battle, which were all being ensconced in a shut off part of the Mill until the Great Hall was available again as soon as all the other damn tribes left. Hopefully they'd get off their island soon so they could have some peace - ung, it was Snoggletog today. They should be drinking mead and laughing all day, but with Winter right there staring them in the face, everyone was sort of just shrugging and getting their hands dirty, clearing the lava wall, the debris of the burnt down houses and trying to build out the new ones. The Ingermann were certainly going to be busy.

Which was why he was being a good brother and not leaving his sister to be sick all over the backyard, going for the healers' help when her husband was out doing the carpenter's slug jobs and Ruff being left in charge of the baby.

Ung. He was going to turn into a nursemaid soon. This was going to do wonders for his reputation. And was his sister even grateful? Noooo, of course not. Which was good. That would just mean she was very, very sick. And then Tuffnut would be obliged to worry, which was more annoying than anything.

It happened rather quickly, so he had to be forgiven if he hadn't 'seen it coming', like his sister had suggested he should have, later. Well, he hadn't, and it was a good thing too, because otherwise he'd have had to unleash Berk's hottest, in-est most deadly weapon on them all. As it was, there was a sack over his face and a bludgeon to the back of the head before he could blink, and then someone dragged him away while he was feeling dazed and confused.

When they took the cloth sack off his head, his helmet missing - he wasn't happy about that! It matched his sisters, and he didn't have the time or inclination to go get another one done! Not to mention,

it made him used words like inclination in his head. Whoa, that hit must have been harder than he thought.

"The prodigious son returns," said a croaky little voice he hated very, very much. Tuffnut glared, finding good avenue for the anger caused by the pain throbbing at the back of his head.

"That's prodigious grand_son to you. I don't want to be associated with anything close to your naughty bits!"

"It would technically mean the same thing!"

"But indirectly, and that makes all the difference!"

"Well, be that as it may," the creaky voice replied, and the mock-y, horrible-y laugh in it just set Tuffnut's hackles right up. "I am the head of this family. And as such, I can make what I want of you, with or without the direct involvement of my 'naughty bits', " another wheezy cackle. Tuffnut actually shuddered, wondering how many cobwebs were in that trousers. He'd never seen him bathe at all and that was disgusting.

"That's only because you are a sleaze-bag and my mother is a lying, horrible woman," he hissed back. One of his uncles, who had hauled him in and was standing next to him, gave him a punch in the shoulder. But he was a ninny, because his sister hit harder. "Shut up, it's true. What man takes another man's letters!"

"The head of the family, who has every right," the old rickety man said with that smile that made him look like a shark. "Now, now, we have a lot to talk about."

"No, we have nothing to talk about," Tuffnut snapped back, folding his arms. "I have to run an errand for Ruff."

"Well, true," the smelly bastard shrugged, ignoring him, "I have a lot to talk about - you just have listen and do what you're told."

Tuffnut growled.

"Right. So word got around of how you heroically went about catching the last spy. We're proud of you. Makes up for your many â€| discrepancies." Tuffnut restrained the urge to spit at him, so he just decided to imitate Hiccup and rolled his eyes. "We were even approached by a few interested fathersâ€| but of course, we had to turn them all down. Because of your stupidity."

"I've told you," Tuffnut growled. "I never went anywhere near that slut!"

"Then explain to me how she knew the placement of your tattoo, and the birthmarks on your back!"

"Everyone knows about those!" Tuffnut replied, throwing his hands up. "I told you, when we were kids, Ruff and I got all the others to show all the freckles we have! Word got around!" He folded his arms again. "Snotlout's a gossip worse than an old woman. And I know where all the birthmarks are on Astrid, but I didn't sleep with her!"

"Considering she is the betrothed of our future chiefâ€|" Tuffnut was very gratified to see the old man shudder. Maybe he'd go pray to Thor to come visit Hiccup again, and then he'd point him at his grandfather. "Be that as it may, we cannot risk this woman's accusations to come to the public. Our reputation would be ruined, and that cannot be tolerated."

"So you're ready to just write me off to this whore, who by the way will not stop being a whore, and who everyone knows is a whore, when I had other â€| plans?"

"Plans you hatched on your own, without the approval of this family," his grandfather snapped. "And as advantageous as the connection may be for Berk, this family would get nothing from it."

"You only say that because you'd never be able to control her," Tuffnut hissed. His grandfather gave a nasty smirk.

"Oh, I can, and I am - through you, lad. I've enjoyed her little game of cat and mouse; don't think I don't know what you two have been up to, sneaking around and trying to meet where you think no one can see you. But now I'm tired of playing. And I won't let a little girl think she can hoodwink me."

"She's Cami," Tuffnut growled, folding his arms tighter as he felt as if something rather bad was coming. "She'd hoodwink you in her sleep."

"Well, she's had her chance," he replied nonchalantly. Tuffnut got a sick, wiggly feeling in his chest.

"While you're here, my boy, your engagement is being announced in the Hall. And now," the old, horrid man said, ignoring his undignified, squeaky 'what?!" as he saw his hopes being frittered away just like that. He signalled to his uncles, and Tuffnut found his arms being grabbed and he was dragged out again. "Now we're going to the plaza, to present you both, dear boy."

His yelling and protesting was summarily ignored, the smelly old man leading the way as he was taken towards the centre of the village. His struggling only got him a few bruising blows to the legs, so he decided to make this as difficult as possible by letting his body go limp. They had to drag him bodily, and he made sure to hook his legs and feet around as any objects as he could, and tell as many people as possible as they stared at him that he was doing this unwillingly

"I'm being forced into this. I'm an unwilling participant. That's right, I just used the word participant, but I put unwilling in front of it!" he yelled at one of the Hodegarr men as he was dragged by. As he was pulled into the plaza, his shoulders aching terribly, he looked in horror at what looked like half the village gathered there, obvious attracted by the commotion that was being made by his future 'bride', all decked out in snowdrops.

Ruffnut was there with her baby, and glowering like she was going to murder that harlot. Or vomit on her. Tuff quickly got to his feet, getting on tiptoes to try to see where someone else very important was. He felt his stomach plummet when he didn't see her at

all.

"It's a happy day this Snoggetog for the Thorston clan, who would like to announce the engagement of-"

An explosion went off, accompanied by a cacophony of panicked, high pitched 'caaaaaack!'s. The roof of a hen-coop - HA! THE THORSTONS! - went off, a projectile shooting out of it and leaving feathers behind. Panicked chickens began getting everywhere, and then suddenly, more explosions started going off, each with panicked squaks and clucks and a cascade of delicately falling feathers. Tuffnut began cackling uncontrollably.

"Demon child!" his grandfather hissed at him.

"Not me," he grinned, manically. "Never do the same trick twice. And I was with my sister all morning."

"And I was sick all morning, so I kept him busy," Ruffnut replied, also cackling as her child laughed a high, hiccupy laugh every time a bird went up with another "'BOOM'!"

People began to scatter, both trying to catch the things as well as run away from them when they stopped and looked around in confusion for a moment too long, seconds before they exploded in a painless bam of explod-y awesome. Whoever had done this had targeted only the Thorston coop, but then opened the door so that the clan would be responsible for more damage.

He wished he'd come up with it, actually. It was perfect. Then he realised who had, and he fell in love all over again.

A rock the size of a fist hit the old doddery man between the eyes and he went down like a yak. The two men holding Tuff up went down next, and then a huge mead keg hit his 'bride' right on the nose. Tuffnut looked at her with satisfaction as she suddenly looked a lot less smug.

"Get your hands OFF my husband!" Cami yelled, coming forward like a raging bull and grabbing him by his knotted hair. He yelped as she dragged him off without so much as a by-your-leave - not that he minded - and then his arms were tied, his legs here tied, and he was hanging upside down off Sting.

"HEY!" he called out indignantly. He was still mad at her for giving him the cold shoulder for a while, and what she was doing right now was not nice, even if the rescuing was totally a-ok with him.

"Don't you dare protest, you! You're mine!" She yelled at him.

"I'm not protesting that. I'm protesting the hog-treatment!" he yelled back at her. "Whoa, the blood is going right to my head, though. This is totally a good idea. I changed my mind!"

Sting took off, jostling him terribly and making his helmet fall off. Ruff picked it up and cheered, waving it in the air as she wolf-whistled.

"My name is Cami, heir to the Bog Burglar tribe!" she yelled down

furiously. "And I declare that Tuffnut here is my husband! His clan have tried to interfere and went against treaty rules, and I'm taking him back!"

A couple more chickens went off in the background to punctuate her statement, whistling up all the way - if you asked him - to Asgard, where they had a place amongst the fallen for a noble cause.

"Oooh yeah!" Tuffnut yelled, feeling slightly dizzy from all the blood in his head, but also pretty elated. He was getting kidnapped by a hot woman who wanted to be his wife. What wasn't to like about that? Even the hog-treatment was growing on him.

"Tuffnut!" his mother's admonishing voice rose up. He glared down at her.

"What do you expect to say? 'Oh no, I'm really upset that one of the hottest girls in the archipelago wants to be my wife?' or maybe 'put me down because I'd rather be with Whory Slutslut' there?"

"Tuffpuffin? You're interrupting my speech," Cami said sweetly from above. And he really hoped his sister hadn't heard that one. Not that he minded, actuallyâ€¦ but he just wanted to keep it under wrapsâ€¦

"I'm off to consummate my marriage!" Cami said happily down to the crowd,, more chickens going boom to celebrate that announcement, and a great deal of them actually cheered. Gobber and Bertha saluted her, so at least Tuffnut knew he wasn't going to lose his manbits when they got back.

Manbits that were about to get broken in. Oh yeah!

"If you come after us I'll kill you all!" she finished with a happy, chirpy voice, and all the Bog Woman cheered. The noise faded on the wind as Sting shot off. Tuffnut stayed that way for a few moments, looking at some of the disarray and mess as more chickens went boom and pop and bang, but after a while they were out of sight, and when he got tired of looking at Sting's underbelly, he huffed.

"Hey, any chance of getting me up? If all the blood goes to my big head, there won't be enough for the other one," he called up. Then he scowled. "Unless that was a bluff, in which case leave me here because the head-rush is awesome."

He was quickly heaved up, ending up lying like a sausage across the dragon's back, watching the world go by down instead.

"Eh, fine, whatever, this works too," he shrugged.

"Sorry about this, Tuffpuffin," she said, one of her hands reaching back to ruffle his hair. "But your family forced my hand with that public announcement of the engagement thing. If they'd gone through with it, it would have been over."

"I know. I tried to fight them off. Then I tried to be a dead fish. Then I tried to grab as many buildings on the way as I could. Nothing really worked, not when they still had your letters." He started counting trees, but he lost interest after thirty. Or was that five?

He wasn't sure. "So, why are you all happy about me again? I thought you were mad."

"Not really. Mother just told me that I should lay off, so that I wouldn't push your family into a corner. She seemed to think they'd do something drastic." Tuffnut could practically hear her eyes rolling. It was like being on the dragon with Hiccup, only he had awesome hair, great boobs and loved to break things just as much as Tuffnut did. Oh, and Tuffnut was sort of sure that he loved her. Which was awesome. They could make whole islands explode for their honeymoon. That would be such a great present.

"Well, that worked," he replied in the same flat tone.

"Like putting out a fire with oil."

"There's an idea!"

"We can use it for the wedding!" She said happily. "Backing off a bit actually helped though; for one thing, I had to amuse myself in some way, and so I went and tried your trick with the chickens. Then that little trollop-head actually approached you, so I found out who she was. I love how she stayed away from you when I was there, or any of the others." There was disdain in her voice.

"I liked that," he replied. "She stayed away from me. And I liked the chickens, too."

"Thanks, puffling. And yes, well, you wouldn't tell me which one she was, and then she wouldn't come close, kept sending the others to give the vaguely threatening hints - like a total coward - but then she came up to you in the hall when I sent you off, all flirty and shit." Cami spat. On the other side of her dragon, so it only landed on his boot; that was his lucky boot, now. "So of course, I had one of my women tail her. Turned out a good idea. It was how I got there so quickly this morning."

"Taking on my tailing act, eh?" he said, puffing up. He turned his head to look at her, and found her rump. "Nice view," he said cheekily.

"It's about to get a whooole lot better," she replied. "Hiccup should have us covered now, on those letters. I was going to wait it out like he asked and mum suggested, do the whole 'diplomatic' thing â€‘ but that's just not me, anyway. And I hope I broke her nose."

"I hope so too," he grinned back dreamily.

"Now, all we need are some â€‘ out of the way placesâ€‘. like a nice hidden glade, a comfy caveâ€‘"

"Out of the way, comfy cave?" he said, brightening up. "I know where to go!"

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"You're going to get a bald patch, Thugpuffin," Heather teased from behind him. She was sitting comfortably in a skiff, being hauled along behind Fanghorn. A troupe of ten Vikings strong was riding the skiff with his wife, a Hooligan manning the rudder so that they

wouldn't hit skolls only the locals would know of.

Thuggory yelped and yanked his hand out of his hair, looking down at his wife with a glare. For her part, she was looking as smart as a nadder in the hen house, and looking completely unrepentant. All the others around the boat sniggered, and he was never living it down.

And it wasn't even his nickname! It just happened to fit part of his name perfectly and his wife found it a cruel and amusing way to manipulate him into letting her come.

Tuffnut was going to die when he came back. Thuggory really hoped he got lots of sex, because he was going to die. Cami only got a pass because of the childhood-friend thing, and even that was holding on by a yak-hair.

"I can't help it, I'm worried about those idiots!" yelled back down, lest she decide that he was ignoring her and call him that again.

"You're worried about those idiots, I'm worried about those idiotsâ€¦ we're all worried about those idiots," Heather sighed, and all the people on the skiff nodded, exchanging looks. Two of them were Bog Women, and they looked somewhere between flattered and outraged.

"Our heir can handle herself," One of them called up.

"I'm sure she can," Thuggory replied, calling down. "But it's the rest of it that worries us. Nasty business, this. Hiccup had it sorted with some paper or other, or so he said, but then it all went to Hel's realm in Loki's handbasket."

"Well, if Hiccup's covering it, we have nothing to worry about," a Burk woman stated with a shrug, and Thuggory would have stared if it didn't kill his neck to turn that far around. Ever since the battle, the people of Berk had fallen into one of two catagories; those that wanted Hiccup to sign his name on their breast plate (or breast, usually, if they had one; Astrid hadn't noticed yet) and those who bowed their head and walked quickly past, piss making their boots wet on the inside. Thuggory thought both were an improvement; he still thought Hiccup should have become a Meathead - maybe drag Astrid along - but hey, he respected his bro's wishes.

But only because he was going to be teaching in the academy, too. So he would get bro-time with Hiccup. Because he needed his Hiccup-time, damnit! Still, he was glad that come spring, after wedding season was out, the lessons would start, and they'd have a whole lot of time to spend together. Thuggory wasn't training for chief yet because his father was younger than Stoick, and the babe should have popped out by then, so he could get all his family over.

And it was still not fair that Hiccup was trying to cheat and have an older heir. HE, Thuggory, had scored first! This was something that should be an obvious no take-back, but damnit if Hiccup hadn't somehow managed to acquire that little blonde girl. Thuggory wasn't stupid, and he had eyes. If that little girl wasn't calling Hiccup 'daddy' by the time the Spring came about, Thuggory was a dragon's nephew.

"I can't see nary a sign of them," huffed a Meathead, looking through a borrowed spy-glass. "How many more of these islands we have to see?"

"Quite a few!" the Hooligan woman answered. "They're all Gobber's, so his little lass can just do with them as she will. I don't like this 'bringing them back' thing - those Thorstons were playing foul if you ask me."

"Oh aye, I agree," one of the Bog women replied. "I'll vouch for it. I dunno what actually went down, but our Cami was on a seventh moon to come here before we left, but the moment we touched our feet here trouble started. That lad's loyal to her, that much I can give him, but I don't like the stock he comes from."

"Oh, Tuffnut and his sister are completely different," the Hooligan defended. "Used to be a bit of a curse when they were youngings and went around tipping yak, but now it turned out to be a good thing. They probably take after Boarwind the Marauder, who the Thorstons try to sweep under the carpet even if he brought them half the gold in their coffers."

"Sounds like my kind of man," another Bog woman said, licking her axe. "Ready to fight for it, before and after."

"I say if we find them, we knock politely and camp out, and they can come to the fire when they're good and ready," Heather said slyly. Aah, his smart little wife, manipulating people like a master by waiting for the opportune moment to plant the right idea. Sure enough â€¦

"That's excellent. Or else we can 'overlook' that place completely, and camp conveniently nearby, upwind, and kill a boar or a deer, so when they're hungry enough from the frantic shagging, they'll come on their own," one of the Bog women crowed in triumph. The others all agreed to that in laughing hoots, the rudder man just giving a long-suffering grunt and a shrug. Thuggory sighed, urging Fanghorn on as the conversation on the skiff turned to Heather and her own due date, and baby boots and toy weapons and teething problems.

The next island was right ahead. Thuggory felt better in knowing that they wouldn't disturb anyone, whether they were on the island or not.

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Hiccup had to admit, riding pillion had it's advantages. Astrid didn't block any wind, but he wasn't worried about her getting cold with her furs.

And with his hands. And what he was saying.

"Stooooop that," she intoned, holding back giggles and throwing him a dirty look over her shoulder pad as they flew over raven point. He gave her what he hoped was a shiny, dazzling smile and tried to look as dashing and innocent as possible at the same time.

"But my hands are cold," he replied, blinking.

"Wear gloves next time!" she said, her voice rising to a squeak when his hands burrowed deeper against her hips, curling against the front of her thighs between her leggings and the fur she wore. Another dirty look, and her cheeks were redder than they'd been before with the windswept. "Hiccup, we are feet and feet in the air!"

"And I fall, you'll catch me." Then his grin went wider, getting closer to her ear. "But it's too late. Because I've already fallen. Hard. For you."

As expected, Astrid snorted uncontrollably. "Oh gods, Hiccup, stop that! No more of Snotlout's pick up lines, have mercy on my stitches!" she said, laughing, bent over behind Clover's spikes.

"I'm the one stitched up," he replied, pretending to misunderstand. "Stitched, like my heart, after I saw you. Because Freya split it open to put you in there."

Astrid spluttered into a new peal of laughter, gasping for breath at this point, laughing so hard she was lying flat on her belly. Clover was also giving the high pitched gargles typical of nadder laughter.

"Oh holy Asgard cheese," she chuckled helplessly. "How does Lauga buy this."

"Oh, she buys it by the sack," he replied, waiting a beat before continuing, "of hammies."

"Hiccup!" she screeched in a laugh, slapping her knee and curling up around her mirth-aching belly. "Stooooop!"

"I can block out the sun, but I can never block my bleeding heart for you!" he declared loudly, pretending to flex and reaching for the blazing thing. At least it was cloudless today.

"No flexing," she said breathlessly. "No flexing, you do it just like him, with the wide smirk and the chin at that angle and the eyebrow twitching up and it's too much; ow, ow, ow, mercy!"

"I don't remember you showing me any mercy this morning," he replied cheekily. She poked her tongue out at him, straightening on the nadder.

"You didn't mind at all! Admit it!" she said, gasping, wiggling against him provocatively. But he'd warn one of the comfortable suede trousers this morning, so they weren't tight quite yet. Though her bottom sure felt warm and tight, her spiked skirt conspicuously missing on top the fur trimming skirt she usually woreâ€¢

"Point," she said cheekily, and he started. Then he immediately groaned at himself.

"I'd been on the right track for a point! And then you had to wiggle," he moaned in dismay.

"Works every time," she said, chuckling, with her eyes shining up at him. "But you did have me begging for mercy, so that counts for at least half a point."

"Bla, bla, bla" he said, imitating her head toss, and getting a laugh and a slap on his thigh for it. "So generous!"

"Well, I could always take the point awayâ€|"

"Ha! No takebacks! Takebacks are for pussies, ninnies and people who aren't Snotlout!" he said, again imitating his cousin's stance. Astrid cracked up once more, holding on tightly to Clover's head-spikes. He hoped his cousin didn't get offended, though he never planned on doing this in public, but once he found out she thought him imitating his cousin (or his father) so amusing, he couldn't help himself. "I'll let you touch my glutes if you like."

Aaand he lost that round too, because her eyes sparked.

"Promise?" she said provocatively. He shuddered, and there went his point.

"What, I'm cold!" he tried to bluff.

"Your trousers say you're happy," she chirped back, already waaaaaaay too alright with the part of his anatomy that was still making him embarrassed with its eagerness to say hi to Astrid. And losing him points.

"Fine, I forfeit," he pouted, folding his arms.

"Don't be such a big-"

"_BABY_!"

All three of them - dragon included - jolted. The humans tilted on one side, looking at what was left of Troll Peak underneath them.

"Did that â€| did that come fromâ€|" Hiccup asked, really hoping he was wrong.

"Seems to me," Astrid replied, her voice pained. They had, purposefully, been completely ignoring their surroundings. Hiccup knew that pretty much everyone had enjoyed the show of the husband-napping, so they had, more or less, been tacitly looking-but-not-looking, and no doubt everyone else was doing something similar. Astrid and he had certainly been otherwise occupied, flying the course they had been set, but not giving the terrain any notice at all.

"We're far up," Astrid said with false hope, pretending to look around in the sky. "That must have been carried on the wind!"

"We're not that far up," Hiccup responded with despondence and slumped shoulders. They'd been having fun, and as future chief he hadâ€| responsibilities. That included retrieving kidnapped Hooligans and allies. Ung.

"Tuffnut would be a loud one," Astrid grumbled, angling Clover toward the ground. "Go after the sound, Clover. Come on, boy."

"We have to at least check," Hiccup sighed with a sad nod. "Like that

we won't lie in the council and our bottoms are covered." Then he gave one last, sly smile. "Yours surely is."

"While I want yours naked as often as possible," she quipped back. He blushed instantly, and she preened. "Point! Why did you go for nudity when you know you'll lose!"

"I never mentioned nudity, not with a maiden in earshot," he said airily with a snort of feigned disdain as they touched down. Astrid snorted and slapped his thigh again.

"Well Master Prudence, I would like to inform you that-"

"_Your arse is the most wonderful creation of all of Odin's woooork!_"

Astrid blinked, mouth still hanging open mid-sentence.

"While I agree with that in relation to your arse," she finally said thinly. "I didn't say it."

"Definitely sounded like Tuff," Hiccup said, feeling rather ill. Clover gave an excited gargle, tilting his head to look at them fully with one eye then the other. "Good job, Clover. You followed the noise down to the right cave," he told the dragon with thinly disguised unease, and Clover ignored it in favour of preening.

"Well, I'll go and say hello," Astrid said woodenly, descending. He was about to protest - if nothing else, to save her the trauma of seeing naked Tuff - but then he pouted when he realised that without his prosthetic he couldn't jack shit.

"Good luck," he sighed, waving towards his shorter leg, and she nodded resolutely, entering the cage like she knew a rampaging whispering death was awaiting her in there. She disappeared into the shadows, and a loud yell followed a moment later.

"Sorry! I had to warn you I was here!"

"Why ARE you here! Don't you know not to ruin a sister's fun!?"

"I'm NOT! I'm just warning you guys that we're out there waiting, and that it's better we found you than any of the others. So erer finish up and be!"

Hiccup couldn't make any more out of the conversation, but Astrid walked back out soon after, looking flushed and avoiding eye-contact.

"I could have gone my whole life without seeing that," she said as she helped him down the dragon, much to his confusion.

"Oh yes, ride me like a dragon!'

"Or hearing that," Hiccup deadpanned. "Sorry you had to see the naked Tuffnut bits."

"Oh, I didn't see anything, actually, because Cami was riding him

into the ground," she said in a pained voice. "It's just the context, you know!"

"Ung," he slapped his forehead. "You just had to share that mental image!"

"At least I don't suffer alone," she replied, ignoring his muttering about cruel women. "I told them to keep it down, because we heard them from the sky, but beyond that, it wouldn't be nice to just drag them away in the middle of things."

Hiccup looked horrified as she sat him down on a blanket she'd prepared, getting Clover to light some kindling she'd brought with her. "You mean we're going to be stuck here hearing that for a while?"

She winced. "Sorry," she sighed, sitting beside him. "But we can take it as a lesson!"

"Lesson?" he croaked.

"Yeah to keep it down, because your father's room is right under ours. And there's the little one now, too!"

He paled. That was fantastic. He didn't even have a sex life with Astrid yet, and he was already getting traumatised into behaving.

"We could always borrow Toothless' stall. Or my shed on my island. Or the backroom of the smithy!"

"Look who's so eagerly creative," she teased, laughing his spluttered protests away.

They did their best not to take any notice of the various vocalisations that came from the cave for the rest of the morning, but only with limited success, as the creative comments about various body parts and poultry became louder. When the other two finally emerged looking blissfully content and rumpled, Hiccup could never remember wanting to strangle anyone to death more fiercely than he had the moment Cami gave him two thumbs up and told him he should just do it with Astrid as soon as possible because it was twelve kinds of awesome.

In the end, the only thing that kept her alive was the childhood-friend thing. Barely.

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The Great Hall was full again. The decorations had been put up but the feeling of the enormous room was anything but festive. The faces were long, and in some cases, even angry.

Hiccup looked ready to strangle someone. That was not helping the tense atmosphere in the room at all. His arms were folded and he was sitting on a bench beside Stoick with a thunderous scowl on his face, and he wasn't standing because Astrid had still refused to let him strap his leg on.

Fishlegs looked around, for the first time - well, no, perhaps second

- really itching for a fight. He had a stack of papers hidden in his tunic, and an arm around Ruff and his little darling Woodnut who was kicking her feet happily. Meatlug was on his other side, her eyes slits, none of the usual tongue-lolling happiness, and the dragon was obviously picking up on her daddy's not so happy mood.

Ruffnut began cackling in anticipation. And for once, Fishlegs joined her. The baby began giggling, and Meatlug started a growly purr, and the people around them began to step away. Fishlegs had to admit, he understood the thrill of it, all of a sudden.

Finally, Cami - unapologetically rumpled from head to toe - walked in, smelling heavily of perfume. Fishlegs did not want to analyse why that was a move they would go with right before a meeting concerning what had happened in the plaza. And her clothes were still a mess despite that, so obviously Cami had re-worn the rumpled clothes on purpose. She was flanked by her mother and three of the fiercest women from the ones who'd come for the Thing.

Tuff came in next with Snotlout on one side and Thuggory on the other, walking â€| Ruffnut's cackling took on a snorting feature and Fishlegs tried very hard to stop from joining. Once he had finally sat down, Thuggory and Snotlout still flanking him, Stoick slammed his fist on the table, and the hall went quieter, but not silent. Astrid walked in right in the nick of time, a pretty dressed Ätta tottering behind her until Brunhilda scooted her away to the back of the hall, leaving Astrid to race towards Hiccup and sit down.

"Very well, let's get this over with. I don't know you, but I'm tired of surprised, and I want a nice Snoggletog evening in peace," Stoick declared to much fanfare of tired-sounding 'aye's. Fishlegs noticed Astrid leaning into Hiccup, and he exchanged a look with his wife; they'd all heard the story of how Snotlout had shut them up in that hut, and everyone could see how they'd completely sorted their issues after, however that may be. Stoick had proudly reported that Hiccup had been permanently, from what he'd seen, relocated to the upstairs bedroom - with Astrid still in it - and then the chief had made off with a good thirty heads, grinning like someone other than a Jorgensen had just won Thawfest. Fishlegs had known there was a wager going, but apparently Stoick - and Gobber - had come out the top men. Fishlegs also didn't want to imagine what the subject of the bet was. He only knew that his mother was now being caught with her small pocket of women friends, staring at Astrid's tummy in excited expectation, and so were most of the other people in the village - those who could look Hiccup's way without bolting the other side, that is. Fishlegs just shook his head. The village was so flighty.

"Yes, we had a good deal of happiness planned for today as well," an old man said with a piping voice. Fishlegs recognised Ruff's mother and instantly knew who that was from his wife's knife-riddled effigy at their hall. The Thorston patriarch moved forward, bending on a walking staff in a way Fishlegs knew he didn't need to. He'd seen him pulling a toy away from Goethi's pack of terrors, playing along with them, only last week, and he'd looked spry enough. Ruffnut beside him growled.

"Don't worry, darling," Fishlegs assured her, patting her shoulder. "We have it sorted."

"So we heard," Stoick said, waving a hand. "But only in bits and pieces. I would like you to begin and end; as concisely as possible."

"Very well." The old man rose to his full height - rickety-ness obviously forgotten. "The Thorston clan has been part of this Village since it was founded by your great family, Stoick."

Ah, flattery. Luckily, it didn't work on the 'great family'. Stoick and Hiccup's brows shot down simultaneously as it looked like the last part of Stoick's order was going to be ignored.

"We have always held our honour high-"

Ruffnut promptly spat on the floor. The people in the room went quiet at the blatant, grave insult.

"Ruffnut, defend your action," Stoick said sternly.

"They have got no honour at all." His wife gave the old man a sneer. "They put their so called honour in front of their own blood and family. It's become this sort of obsession for them; they don't even care who they hurt or offend on the way, which is the opposite of honour."

"Hold your tongue!" the old man snapped. "All the village knows of you and your brother's messes. You are the last two people on this island who can talk about honour."

"I have plenty of it," Ruffnut drawled, and Fishlegs was so proud that she hadn't been baited. He squeezed her arm and her manic grin broke through. "There's my word; if I give it, that's that. As you know," she shrugged, and Fishlegs was itching to speak, but a glance at Hiccup and Stoick told him he shouldn't with a short headshake. Yet. Astrid was grinning like a cat, however, head resting openly on Hiccup's shoulder as she watched quietly. "I'm just a Viking. We colour outside the lines."

Cami and her Bog women sniggered, and they received the universal glares of the Thorston clan. Cami took them as a complements, puffing her chest and playing with her crazy hair. Tuffnut reached over, and they slapped knuckles.

"In any case," Hiccup said with a nod towards them both. The room fell very quiet, everyone holding their breath, and Hiccup looked singularly annoyed and uncomfortable. Astrid nudged him and he went on, clearing his throat. "Please finish. Concisely." He had to be tired, still, or ill, because Hiccup actually glared the man down. And it was incredible to see Hiccup's glare work more than Stoick's.

"It was brought to our attention that Tuffnut had indulged in behaviours that did not befit his station. With a woman," he quickly clarified.

Phlegma, who was one of many annoyed people that Snoggletog was being postponed for this, snorted. "All of the village was aware of that." The Hall erupted in laughter.

"With another woman!" the old man replied angrily. The Hall quieted

down, though some disbelieving snorts and titters went up anyway. "And that she is with-child."

That quieted everyone down. Uncertain glances at Tuffnut began to make him twitch, and he glowered angrily.

"Permission to defend myself!" Tuffnut said indignantly, and Stoick huffed, irritated, but waved a hand. "I would like to present, exhibit A!"

Thuggory threw a pair of trousers onto the table, and Thuggory got up to unfold them and hold them up. Fishlegs saw the sidelong glances being passed around between the Thorstons, as well as between Hiccup and Thuggory, and he raised a brow.

"I would like you all to observe," Tuff continued, "the knots on the front. Pass it around! I'd like anyone to try taking them out!"

The trousers went through several hands, some of the Bog women actually making real attempts to take the knots out. Even some of the ship-men raised a brow at them, passing the on after a few tries. "Well, those were the failsafe on my trousers. Because I was seeing not _a_ Bog lady, but _the_ Bog lady."

"We thought it was more fun if he put up a fight before I got what's in his pants," Cami said with a sly smile. "And I couldn't get them off."

"What?!" Bertha asked. Cami smirked like a fox.

"I thought it was terribly inconvenient at first, but now it's a blessing, because I know my Tuffpuffin's saying the truth for sure. That woman can't possibly be with-child from him. He woke up with those knots intact in the morning. I can't get them loose, there's no way she could get them and then do them up again the same!"

"Well, as compelling an argument as that isâ€|" Stoick sighed. "I didn't see the trousers the day after. I can't know that what you are saying is the truth."

"What!" Tuffnut said, standing, obviously upset. Then he sank into his seat again. "Oh, I knew I should have showed my trousers to everyone. I'm going to be showing them all the time!"

"What I would like to know is, if these knots are so impregnable, how come you two were reported to have consummated yourâ€| tryst."

"It's called a wedding night, old man. Can't expect you to remember of course," Cami replied with a shrug that made Ruff's grandfather turn scarlet. "But I was playing fair before, because it was a fun game and my Tuffpuffin asked. Of course," a dagger was stabbed into the table in front of her almost hilt deep. She looked at the old man with a glint in her eyes. "Desperate times, they sayâ€|"

"Well, it is your business if you have ruined yourself," the old man spat back, making all the Bog Burgars in the room reach for their weapons - which unfortunately, everyone had forgotten to remove. Fishlegs began to sweat slightly, while his wife beside him looked like it finally _was_ Snoggletog. "But the Thorston clan has decided

that Tuffnut is honour-bound to do his duty to her, and that this arrangement supersedes any unofficial one that Tuffnut offered you without permission of the Clan Head."

"You have proof of this agreement he offered?" Hiccup asked, and Tuffnut looked like he wanted to strangle him before trying to hide his face by staring down at his lap. Cami looked openly dismayed, as if Hiccup had stabbed her in the back. "It is a grave accusation that you make."

"I would think that the display in the plaza this morning would be proof enough!" the old man huffed, "but of course, I have proof. Here." He put a pack of letters on the table, and they were passed around to Hiccup. Someone had thought to pass them the other way around the table, because Tuffnut looked ready to throw them into the central fire. "Those are what my pass for love letters between two terribly violent youths these days."

"You've read them?" Hiccup asked incredulously. The room went quiet at his displeasure again, and Hiccup rolled his eyes with a huff.

"I'm the head of the household!" the old man returned with defiance, standing at his full height and calling his own earlier bluff as a frail old dear.

"So is my father," Hiccup snapped. "But he respects me better than that." The room was still quieter than it had ever been unless it was empty at night (he never wanted to remember that dare again; please Odin no), so Hiccup just went on. "In any case, these letters openly demonstrate that as you say, there was a prior understanding between Tuffnut Thorston and Cami, heir to the Bog Burglar tribe."

Hiccup gave one look at his father before he went on, who nodded at him. "Well, if I am honest, I would have preferred tackling this delicately. More privately, perhaps, especially considering your heightened sense of honour." The old man looked sharply at him, as if trying to see if he was being made fun of. "But as things stand now, the arrangement with Cami which Tuff made through these letters takes precedence over anything else."

"WHAT?" The man shrieked. Tuff's mother looked like she was going to faint.

"I think my good friend and future advisor Fishlegs should take the floor," Hiccup said, and Fishlegs could feel himself go red at the last, unexpected part. "He was reviewing the archipelago laws for me a few weeks before the Thing." Ah, cunning. "And in the list of things he found, he uncovered a clause in the original treaty copy that Berk owns, like all the other allied clans. Fishlegs?"

"As Hiccup is saying," he said, chomping on the bit to speak about everything. "There is a clause in the original treaty that states that Bog women who are to lead the tribe must marry in accordance to all tribe customs, even if the other Bog women may do as they please." He cleared his throat. "But there is a sub-clause that states that the Bog heir only has one chance to marry, and that should an arrangement be reached, it cannot be breached by any prior or posterior arrangements."

The room exploded into a hubbub of talk, and Fishlegs promptly produced the booklet within which he had copied the law, passing it to Stoick and Bertha via the other end of the table - old man Thorston was the one ready to throw things into the fire this time.

"Well, it seems clear enough," Bertha said, her voice dripping satisfaction. "My daughter was perfectly within her right."

"What about me!" came a loud voice, and the girl stepped forward who'd been in the plaza before. Fishlegs recognised her as one of the barmaids, but he couldn't remember her name for the life of him.

"You are the one Tuffnut was promised to?" Hiccup asked incredulously.

"Yes, and he gave me this as a token!" she replied, putting something down on the table. It was a steel toy axe no larger than a thumb.

"You are a bit silly in the head, as well as a bad liar," Hiccup answered in a tone Fishlegs had never heard him use before. "Ginna, I gave you that as payment for a meal you got me to the forge some weeks ago."

Ginna went white.

"What's more, I gave that to you to get rid of you after you made a pass at me."

Astrid was suddenly sitting rim-rod straight, looking at Ginna like a dragon watched its meal. Fishlegs almost snorted as Hiccup preened at that reaction.

"You rather lewdly implied that you could, how did you put it â€| keep a man happy, because you rather doubted Astrid could. I was not at all pleased with the comment to my promised, and sent you packing."

"That's not true!" she replied in panic. "It's your word against mine!"

"But I don't have any reason to lie on this issue. And quite frankly, if you were already engaged to Tuffnut, your attempts to seduce me are very obvious grounds for that arrangement's dismissal anyway."

"But â€| the babe," she said, looking lost.

"The village will support you," Stoick stated, "but I want no more of this nonsense." Ginna gave a trembling nod, backing up slightly. "I want a word with you first thing tomorrow morning lass, you hear?" Another nod. Droplaug was suddenly at her side, ever nurturing.

"We will take her in, Stoick," the quiet woman said, surprising Fishlegs. Why that sneaky mother of his, she hadn't informed him about this plan of hers ... "but only if you address a further grievance the Thorstons have committed."

Oh. Darn. Fishlegs felt rather put out that his mother had stolen his thunder... he had this whole speech preparedâ€|.

"Very wellâ€|" was Stoick's tired reply.

"Some weeks ago the Thorstons called a meeting in which they obliged my daughter Ruffnut to attend, even though she has joined the Ingemann clan for many months now." His mum glared at all the Thorstons and Fishlegs blinked, He'd never seen his mum so much as frown! "And they swore her to secrecy about Tuffnut's forced arrangement with this girl, when they had only her word to go by." She turned to Ginna. "No offense dear."

"It is the right of the head of the family—"

"You are head of no one in my family!" Fishlegs gaped. His mother had actually yelled. Quite a few people in the Hall openly stared, Brunhilda included. "Not only is Ruffnut my daughter now, by right, because the marriage contract was duly signed and paid, but you made her swear to silence on her daughter's head!"

There was a flurry of angry murmuring.

"You had no right!" Droplaug went on. "Not only is the babe an Ingemann with no connection to the Thorstons, but you put poor Ruffnut in such a false position she did not know which walls to blow up!"

Another flurry of angry murmurs. Obviously everyone thought their walls were in danger, and were none too pleased to know of the female-twin loose-canon that had been walking amongst them unawares.

"So due to this, and speaking for my husband because he's on patrol, bless him, I not only ask the council to accept that Ruffnut's clan name be officially changed to Ingemann, and that Astrid be placed as Woodnut's godmother," Fishlegs saw Ruffnut's mum look at her daughter with startled eyes, and his wife jutted her chin out at her defiantly. Poor Mother Gerda looked rather diminished as she looked down at her lap, "But also that the council validate this action as a personal insult to the Ingemann clan."

Another flurry of murmurs; this time, very, very worried ones. Fishlegs knew his clan were, apart from the chief's, mostly the peace-makers of the village. There had never been a feud with their clan, personal or otherwise, and the village was a little off-balance now.

Good. So the Thorstons and their honour knew what they were costing the village.

"That is a serious matter," Stoick agreed with a nod. "Do you have demands that would drop the charges, or do you intend to pursue them?"

"We would accept it if the current 'head of clan' retired," Droplaug said, holding her chin up.

"Out of the question," the old man said.

"I beg to differ," Stoick growled.

"You can't interfere in internal clan affairs!" he snapped back. A long, clicky staff came out of nowhere, and suddenly the Goethi was standing right next to him. She hit him on the knee next, dropping him on his arseâ€| then waved her staff over him, rattling the bones and teeth on it, and raised her arms. Her pack of terrors picked her up and placed her gently on the table, where she rattled her staff a little more in an ominous way, rolling her eyes, and began scratching onto the table with her dirty staff after a few moments of silence.

"Well," Brunhilda supplied before Gobber could jump in. "She says that the gods advise a breath of fresh air. Old men are bad omens â€| just look at Mildew." The crowd began mumbling in agreement. Fishlegs caught the old woman's sly smile seconds before it slipped off her serious face. "She also says that the best way for peace to be restored is if he were tarred and feathered."

"WHAT?!"

"If the gods say so," Hiccup said and everyone's eyes brightened a little bit. Hiccup didn't seem aware of how much weight what he said had yet, but Fishlegs was sure he was going to start using it on purpose for now. Till thenâ€|

"My son is right, the Goethi's word is final," Stoick said, standing up. "Your clan will need to find a new Head of Household. For now, Snoggletog was seriously in need of some fun." Fishlegs saw him grin under the beard. "Someone bring some tar! The gods know we have more than enough feathers lying around."

"But, those two, the wedding!" Tuffnut's mother asked, her tone so sad that Fishlegs felt a little sorry for her. Ruffnut beside him groaned and looked like she'd bitten into something bitter. He was sure she was hating herself for also feeling a little sorry for her mum, too. She was going to be breaking stuff all over the house tomorrow, making Woodnut cackling and clap her hands as she threw the earthenwear everywhere. And then she was probably going to talk to her. Because that was his Ruff.

Still, they could have some fun now.

"I think we can handle that tomorrow," Stoick said with a patient, indulgent voice. He probably felt sorry for her too. She'd been really happy when she'd been named godmother. "We can sit down with Bertha and work out the terms."

"But at least she can have herbs? To be safe?" Glenda insisted.

"Oh alright, fine," Stoick says, waving her off. The Goethi cackled some more, hopping off the table nimbly and sloshing a bottle menacingly at Cami. Something told Fishlegs she'd come prepared. "Now, everyone, to the plaza! Let's make this a new Snoggletog tradition!"

Everyone walked out eagerly, Ruffnut tugging him by the fur on his vest. Snotlout was dragging the old man out and ignoring the protests.

"Come on, hurry," she hissed at him gleefully. "I know a prime tar spot - you go get the feathers from the Thorston's hall!"

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The Goethi was having the time of her life.

WHACK

"Ow, you stupid- why do I have to drink this, I'm not the one who can get babied!" Tuffnut complained.

Gobber's girl snickered at him. So the Goethi whacked her too. Because she could. "Hey, watch it, elder!"

Goethi looked at them both as sternly as she could muster. They both scowled, and they both drank the foul concoction. The faces they pulled were so highly amusing that she almost cackled. But she just memorised it so that she could send a letter to the Bog healer to tell her all about it. They had to keep up the pretence after all, and there was no reason why she couldn't share the fun with her fellow healer.

Goethi looked around the Hall at the rest of the festivities. Most of the other clans would be going back tomorrow, the Trollguts taking the Berserkers back to their home island with their ship fleet, which had arrived way too late for the battle, but just on time to escort the tribe in disgrace back. The new chief, appointed by the drugged up Hiccup had been universally approved - again Goethi tried not to snicker at how they'd all thought he was touched by the gods. Such nonsense. Everyone knew your breath stank after you were touched by the gods.

Master Touched by Thor right now was sitting on a bench, leg still conspicuously missing, He was wearing a fanfare of suede and fur and embroidery, all dark purple and tan, which Astrid had probably forced him into - that boy had worn the same set of tunics when he'd been left to his own devices. At the moment, however, he was leaning against the self-same girl, both of them seemingly attached at the hip. Maybe they needed a new word for it now, because those two were redefining the concept. Maybe Hiccstrid could be a new word.

They were both fast asleep, ignoring the yells and the people and the dragons and the lights around them, leaning against one another and utterly wiped out. Åtta, who was responsible for three quarters of their fatigue, was also - finally - asleep, curled up in Hiccup's lap, thumb in her mouth and looking for all the world like she'd been in that family all her life. The two newborn dragonets, both with mottled blue and grey scales and large green eyes, were curled up and asleep in Astrid's lap, and the adult night furies were sitting up behind the humans, holding them up and seemingly keeping watch. A cacophony of babies and adult dragons added to the Snoggletog decorations, ale flowing and laughter abounding. For all the world, Hiccup, Astrid and Åtta looked like any common happy family.

And just because she was feeling happy, for them and for her apprentice, Goethi made Cami and Tuffnut drink more of the foul herbal medicine, raising a cup of mead of her own in silent salute before hopping off and walking towards the kegs. The Bog girl, from what she'd understood, had been on the wrong side of her moon to

become with-child. But making them drink that horrid, bitter, pasty drink was always so much fun. She added the meshed bitter herbs to it just to make it even more horrid. Suites them well for having their own fun instead of waiting. And though she couldn't blame these two, she couldn't resist making the Thorston boy protest loudly and contort his face into all those interesting shapes.

The next generation was going to be so much fun. Goethi hoped she didn't croak before she saw it. The gods had left her on Midgard for long enough - her bones could say so clearly - but she still hoped for a little bit more. These ones' children were going to be a riot, and she was sure that everyone else was going to keep up well enough.

Yes, Goethi thought as she looked at children and baby dragons run and cackle and laugh and sneeze fire. The next few years were going to be fun.

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This is officially the last chapter. Only one more epilogue to go!

25. Epilogue - Winter is Dead

And the Epilogue. Without further ado; here is â€|

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Long Winter's End.<p>

LÃ-f and LÃ-fÃ%rasir

**Epilogue - Winter is dead**

**She turned to the sunlight**

**And shook her yellow head, **

**And whispered to her neighbor:**

**"Winter is dead."**

â€• _**A.A. Milne**_

Astrid helped Hiccup down onto the blanket she'd brought, and then began bringing the food she'd brought with her out of the basket and laying it across within easy reach. The ale followed, and the water, with pies and fresh baked goods making it all smell sweet.

Brisinga had been planted into the ground at the mouth of the glen, as if inviting Thor to bless this first outing of theirs as a family. The sun, shining brightly from between the sparse clouds, a treat

that was so strange even in late Winter, sent bright lights flickering off the blade in reflections dancing on the new grass, and Åtta shrieked with laughter, following the two dragonets around as they pounced on the dancing lights, rolling with them, tackling her to the grass.

It was eight weeks after Snoggletog, and everyone had finally, finally left Berk last week. Not a moment too soon - they would be coming back for dragon training in another six weeks. Hiccup was still healing, but the wound had finally scabbed, and if he did what he was told for long enough, it would also, finally, heal. When Astrid had found out about his usual form of self-medication, which involved dragon saliva and unbelievable amounts of pain, she'd clocked him hard enough to confine him to bed for a day.

She sat down next to him with a sigh, enjoying the crisp air, the sweet child laughter and the high pitched chirps made by the night fury babies. They'd flown on Toothless, Hiccup tinkering with his rig until he could fly alone, and the female, who had resisted all attempts at taming, had flown beside them with the babies riding on her back excitedly. By the way she had begun looking at the sky constantly of late, Hiccup had begun to try to prepare them all to wake up one morning and find her gone. Since Toothless was mostly in charge of feeding and nurturing the youngings, it seemed unlikely that she would take them with her, but he'd been trying to prepare Åtta anyway.

And with the way that girl had begun calling them, there was very little doubt that she would listen to him. She'd come to adore 'papa Hiccup' and any word that fell out of his mouth was like the law. Astrid had more of a struggle, especially since she found it so strange to be called mama by a child who was her niece, but she wasn't about to break the little girls' heart. So Mama Astrid and Papa Hiccup they were, as declared by the child last week, their names a permanent fixture because they weren't her first mama and papa. Hiccup hadn't managed to win his battle with the council to adopt her yet, but few in the village doubted that he was her papa, though everyone knew her real father had fed the fishes months ago, and was dining in Ras's hall. Astrid knew it was only a matter of time, now, especially after she had caught Stoick dandling her on his knee, telling her stories as if that was her rightful place and he'd done it every day of his life.

"All this just for us three?" Hiccup said in amusement, raising a brow at her. She nodded, looking at him defiantly.

"We have to start working on your Viking gut," she replied with a laugh, enjoyed the way he snorted and then tumbled into laughter. They were both freshly washed, coming out of the bathtub to escape the village for half a day for this much-needed them-time. Bless her, as much as Astrid loved Åtta, she sometimes wished she could have more time to herself with just Hiccup. They weren't even married yet, and already there was a child to throw a damper on things. At least Astrid had kept the bath-time as strictly 'them' time, Åtta getting washed first with her Grandpa Stoick and then tottering off to get none-too-subtly pampered at the Hall on a normal wash day. Hiccup was still maintaining his strict adherence to his oath, and Astrid had grudgingly accepted it, but the bath-time, at least, was theirs alone.

The strain had increased, though, now that the prospect of their moratorium had lengthened.

Astrid sighed, and Hiccup gave her a sad look. "You're thinking about it again," he said, kindly but admonishingly. She leaned into him, and he threw an arm around her. She fed him a slice of pie.

"I can't not," she replied forlornly. It had been decided last week that Tuff and Cami's wedding would be held first thing next Spring. And Berk could not afford two archipelago-scaled weddings in one season. So their own nuptials had been moved till the Autumn Harvest. It had been a blow Astrid had felt more than she dared to show. She was gasping for her life, finally, to start anew as Hiccup's wife. Even if nothing she did changed, if her daily routine remained exactly the same, something about it finally being set in stone made all the difference to the both of them.

And he'd finally, finally let go of that oath, too.

"I have something for you. I hope it cheers you up," he said with a grin, letting go of her to rummage in a small bag he'd brought with him. to bring out a small sack. Holding up her cupped hand, he emptied to trinkets into it, and bringing them close to herself, she realised they were earrings that matched her necklace.

"Do you like them?" he asked, half smile still on his face.

"Put them on me?" she asked in returned, feeling the usual thrill of his touch as his pads delicately inserted the hooks into her lobes, their slight weight feeling foreign but delightful. His hands descended to rest on her shoulders, and she just closed her eyes and let him kiss her, loving he was initiating their intimacies more and more. They had never really escalated beyond the gentle touch - they'd never even come close to being as intimate as they'd been on Snoggletog morning, not with three babies in the house, but waking up with his heartbeat in her ear every morning was turning out to be an unexpected balm.

Not that she didn't want to enjoy her husband. Damn it, she had every right. But they were happy with the place they were in right now, finally full of happiness and light.

When he moved away from the mellow, languid kiss, leaving her heart a soggy mess she was now used to, they lay down on the blanket, looking at one another, trusting the dragons to take care of all three children.

"I have something else," he whispered. She scoffed at him, but smiled, watching the answering toothy sunshine that had nothing to do with the one in the sky. He brought a sack out of his pocket, made out of silk, and dropped two rings between them.

"You smithed our wedding bands?" she asked in excitement, unsure whether she could reach for them yet. She wanted to snatch them up really badly.

"Almost. Something better," he said, rising to one elbow and picking on circlet up between his fingers. "Go on, give me your hand. The other one's there." He slid it onto her right ring finger, smiling, offering her his own. She put it on him with some confusion, which

she decided to ignore as the rest of the happiness made no other emotion worth keeping.

"Promise rings," he whispered, and her eyes lit up.

"To wear until the real things come on," she continued. He shrugged.

"And after, if you like. I'll still wear mine. As many marks of ownership as I can seems be the road to make you happy, I think," he pretended to squirm pointedly - his trousers were in soft suede today, so he was just being an idiot. "Or so I've noticed."

"Not my fault you're a stud," she chuckled, kissing him and earning a groan. She moved back, and it was her turn to bring her gift out. Ever since he'd begun officially courting her, she'd been showered with gift after gift, the hall smelling of fresh flowers every day, and she'd been feeling terribly remiss about not returning the favour. But at last, it was ready.

She didn't have his dramatic flair. The chord just went over his head and the wooden figure of Mjolnir bounced against his chest.

"There," she said with some satisfaction. She'd agonised over every single carving, every tiny curve of wood and polished edge on the minute hammer of Thor. If he was going to wear one, she was going to make it the best one she'd ever done.

At least until she gave him a first born.

The thought made her blush, but luckily, he was kissing her enthusiastically the next moment, so it was easily disguised with her happy panting. They lay down flat again, Astrid allowing her ear to find its habitual place within the curve of his shoulder to listen to his heartbeat.

"So how did Thuggory like the new pulley system you installed on all the ships?" she murmured, a grin already forming on her lips. When they had seen the Meatheads off a few weeks ago, they'd had a little bit of fanfare, as most of the other tribes had left too. So they'd broken out the dragon formations and the fleet in a farewell display. Everyone had been more than eager to participate; they had all won a significant victory together.

"He was utterly green with envy. I told you he would be. When the sails unfurled all together, with a single tug? He was demanding the pulley as some sort of first-child gift, or wingman gift. Toothless threw him into the sea.

"Rightfully," Astrid said, laughing as she imagined it. She'd been up in the air leading a dragon formation, while Hiccup, still confined to the sedentary life, had been put in charge of the fleet with Stoick. "No one beats Toothless in the wingman department."

"Snotlout triedâ€|"

"But he's too busy wooing his own lady," Astrid replied with a smile. Lauga was turning out to be a sweet, even-tempered girl, and good match for the idiot blockhead. "Still, I'm waiting on that promise of

yours to teach me a few new dances you learned while you were away, so no macho competitions till that leg is healed." She smirked, knowing what was going to follow. "Or I'll tie you to the bed."

"Oh, the horror," he replied in a flat voice, pretending to shiver. "I don't know what's worse, being tied down, with a beautiful woman hovering over me, or teaching you how to dance, getting to touch those long, long legs â€|"

"Tease," she snorted, kissing his neck in retaliation, and he groaned. His hair tickled her nose, and she huffed. Sitting up, she cupped his face and moved it to the side, then grabbed his overgrown messy mop at the base of his neck and began working.

"What â€| are you doing?" he asked, face slightly smooshed and looking at her in askance.

"Braids," she replied shortly. "So your hair doesn't annoy me as I torture you."

"Huh, good to know that you at least admit it," he replied, eyebrows arched up in a near irresistible way. Her fingers make short work of it, leather thongs still in her pockets, and she tied off two braids.

"One for each conquest," she murmured, kissing his nose.

"Huh?" was his smart answer. He was such a dweeb sometimes.

"The Queen dragon," she said, gently pulling one braid. "And the Beserkers." She looked down at him as his face darkened with a shadow. He'd eventually found out what had really happened, despite her and Stoick's attempts to keep it under wraps. He'd been mightily upset that they'd fed him piss, but he'd been even more upset to know that he had killed, and did not even remember it. At least they had managed to convince him that the actual number of his kills had been an exaggeration - pretence aided by the fact that the rumour mill kept increasing it. If he ever found out he'd killed sixty men, it would be a blow. She'd save him from it for as long as possible.

"So â€| the prisoners?" she asked, brushing his fringe out of his face. "They've all been dealt with now?"

"Finally," he sighed. "You heard dad talk about it yesterday at supper?" She nodded. "Mildew didn't last long, and the others were too far gone. They'd all just been trying to make personal gain - even out of each other. I still can't imagine how Sleet came to be that man's daughter. Still, that's over with â€|"

"Hmm," she said, fiddling with his second braid. "At least she has Dogsbreath now, if I'm not too much mistaken."

Hiccup grinned up at her. "Did you put a few sheep on it too?"

"A whole yak," she smirked.

"Where are you getting the yak if you lose?" he asked with an incredulous laugh.

"I figured I'd just get Gobber drunk and cover him in yak pelt," she

snickered back, enjoying the way his throat bobbed as he threw his head back and laughed. He looked up at her fondly.

"No braid for my greatest conquest of all?" he intoned, obviously teasing.

"That would be?"

"The most beautiful woman's heart," he replied, preening. Said heart gave a jolt, both of happiness, but also of slight worry. She was getting used to it, that powerful word falling occasionally from his mouth. But she wasn't quite ready to say it herself. Perhaps, she was beginning not to have a problem between her and herself that what she was feeling for him was, in fact, an emotion larger, more all-consuming than care or affections. But the leap to her mouth hadn't happened yet.

So smiled at him with as much guile as she could put in there. His answering blush made her feel on top of the world.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Master Hiccup," she purred. "First give me a wedding night, and then we'll see about giving you the heart."

"Argh, cruel woman," he replied in mock agony, and they both burst out laughing. She rested against him again, Åtta's voice counting in the background as she obviously played the hopping game with the tiny dragonets. They had discovered hopping through the little girl, and they were adoring their brief moments of being airborne as they glided back down after each hop. The distinct night fury laugh meant that someone had either fallen over or made a hash of things - but they were too comfortable to move, his arm passing under her to caress her back while his other moved up to cup her shoulder.

"_Towards the Great Beyond._" he murmured. Astrid smiled.

"I love that. I never said thank you, by the way," she said softly, caressing his front. "I've learned those two verses off by heart."

Hiccup tensed underneath her, and for a second she was confused.

"There are three," he said.

"Three?" she asked, rising to look at him again. "Three what?"

"Three verses." She blinked, startled. He gave a sheepish smile. "You didn't find the third one?" he asked.

She shook her head, feeling both dismayed, and annoyed. And then excited; he was looking so sheepish, a flush rising up his neck in a way that spoke volumes.

"So what is it?" she asked, proud she kept her voice even. His head rose, lips murmuring against her ear until she was fairly trembling. When he was done, she squeezed him to within an inch of his life.

"In Autumn," she said, her voice happy but tinged with some regret. "Hold that thought till Autumn. Hold it till forever."

"Till forever," he agreed, bringing his arms up to hold her as tightly.

The moment was broken when two tiny - but surprisingly strong - dragonets pounced on them, obviously thinking their hug was a pile invitation. Åttta joined in, and Toothless dropped his chin on everyone, eliciting a great groan. The female rolled belly up, laughing until her tongue lolled out.

"Well, then," Astrid sighed, pushing everyone off. "Who wants fish and pie?"

Laughter and hubbub ensued as the food began to change hands and get munched, water and drink pouring, voices rising in both human and dragon communication. The warm patch of ground glowed around them, the balmy afternoon sun inviting the grass and the flowers to shoot up towards it, filing the world in green reaching out to blue, and blue blending with green.

Astrid looked at Hiccup, over Åttta's head, and smiled at him, her heart beating wildly when he just smiled back.

Till next Autumn. Or till forever. Winter was almost over, and Spring was at the door.

Think of me when swinging

This gift I give unto

She who Freyja favours.

Cleave ye the mighty foe

Who will stand in your path

Towards the Great Beyond.

Have mercy on the one

Of whom you own the heart

Whose fires wrought this blade.

=0=

ENDIR

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**And this is the end, once again. I hope you enjoyed the ride. For all those who have questions â€“ especially about how this fits into the second film, wellâ€œ I haven't seen it yet, obviously, so I have a GOOD idea of what goes on there from the great big spoilery trailers, but I may be wrong. I have also decided that the Red Death's demise was a trigger for all the happenings that followed, and therefore the events that happen in 2 will occur â€“ but later,

months or years down the line.**

I also really, really hope they address the baby-abandoning tendencies of one 'Valka Haddock', because frankly, all the feels I'm getting for her with every new trailer is a deep-rooted hate for leaving a one-year old (I'm guessing) Hiccup behind, and as Foxy and I discussed, every single dragon and human death that happened until Hiccup stopped the war is **_*her*_ fault, because she could have been teaching training for a lot longer if she'd, you know, bothered to go back to her village sometime.**

**We'll see. I'm going to miss Chris Sanders a great deal, but I'm sure Dean made a good job. **

Regaring the **_*DrÃ³ttkvÃ¶tt*_ "Astrid was not looking for another verse, and neither was Fishlegs, because this form of poetry usually only has two verses. And if you recollect, Hiccup was actually agonising over whether to add the secret third one, and made sure to hide it very well.**

Cheers! I hope you enjoyed the second ride on the carousel. Don't hold your breath for any more, at least for a good while! Professional life calls. Summer is conference season.

End
file.